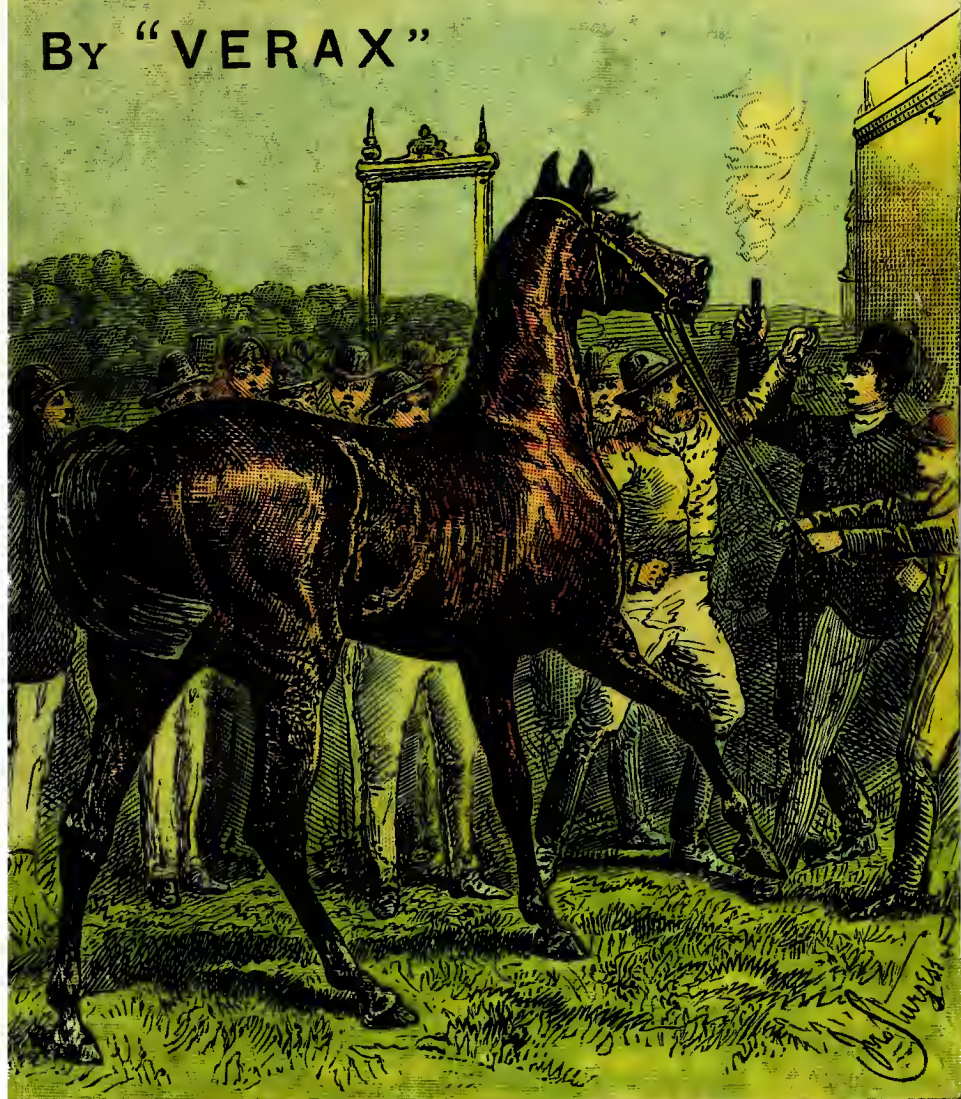


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OR

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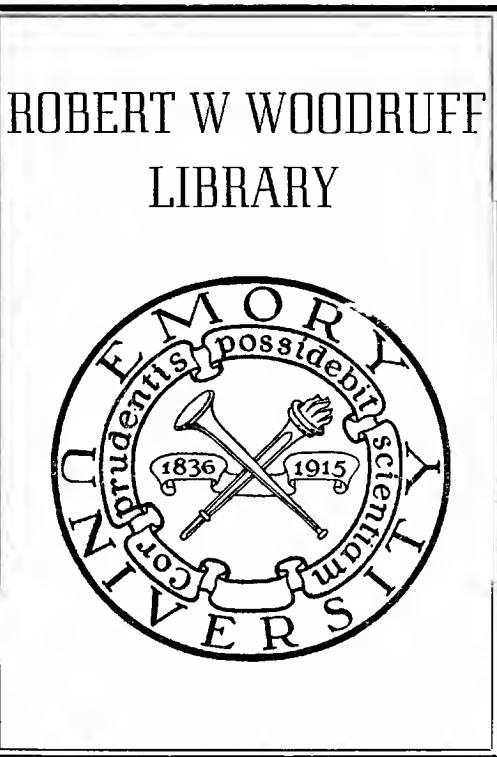
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OR

HARD HIT

BY

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(NAT GOULD)

AUTHOR OF “THE DOUBLE EVENT,” ETC.

LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS, LIMITED

BROADWAY, LUDGATE HILL

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RUNNING IT OFF

CHAPTER I

THE SQUATTER'S DAUGHTER.

"SHE'S the best rider this side Sydney! Just look at her, Bill! Whoa! you brute! Ah! that's it. Let go her head, Miss. What a seat! Firm as a rock! There's nobody like our Miss Tilly!"

These ejaculations came in jerks and starts from Fred Martin, head man at Yeronga Station, the property of the Hon. Robert Briscoe, M.L.C., better known as Bob Briscoe, and in former times even as Yeronga Bob.

The subject of these remarks was a fine handsome girl of eighteen, seated on a coal-black mare that endeavoured in every possible way that entered her splendid head to unseat her fair burden. The girl sat the mare splendidly. With a bound that would have thrown many a practised bush-rider out of the saddle, Coal Queen made a last attempt to unseat her rider. The effort was futile, and the mare, with flanks heaving, nostrils wide, and blowing hard, her sides reeking with lather, and dashing the white froth from her mouth, stood panting but not tamed, waiting for a fresh opportunity to obtain the mastery.

"There's nobody like our Miss Tilly," said Fred Martin, and he spoke the truth. The pet of the station, the idol of the Hon. Robert, the most daring horsewoman in the west of sunny New South Wales, the envy of her sex when she deigned to appear in town. There sat Tilly Briscoe, patting the arched, reeking neck of the beautiful, but wilful animal she had recently had such a tussle with.

A beautiful girl. Glowing with health, her cheeks flushed with excitement, and her rosy lips parted in a winning smile, disclosing pearly white teeth, and below a small, dimpled chin. Her hat had come off in the struggle, and her nut-brown hair floated in the breeze for a few moments and then settled in graceful folds, until it swept the mare's back. Lovely hair! It could not be bought at any price. Nature had adorned Tilly Briscoe with a lavish hand. Her bright eyes, blue as the skies above, were shaded by long, silken lashes—destined to do much execution if ever eyes were. Her neat, compact figure, set off to perfection in her tight-fitting habit, and a ringing voice that thrilled its listeners.

This is but a faint picture of the squatter's daughter.

Tilly Briscoe was the idol of her father, and she was his only child. The Hon. Robert loved her as he had never loved human being before. Her mother died when she was two years old, and she had been brought up under the watchful eye of her father and a demure but accomplished governess, who also acted as house-keeper at Yeronga. The Hon. Robert Briscoe was credited with being a wealthy man. He owned thousands of acres of land in the West, and he had valuable properties in Bathurst, Sydney, and elsewhere. He had worked hard in his young days, and had succeeded

mainly by his own exertions and indomitable perseverance. He became a man to know and respect, and the Government half a score years before the commencement of this story had made him a member of the Upper House. He accepted the honour for his daughter's sake, but he did not think much of it. He had an idea that the honourable gentlemen of the Upper House were rather a sleepy, harmless, insignificant body that never did much harm, and certainly did very little good. His first appearance in the Legislative Council caused a sensation. He spoke his mind with a vigour and disregard for the opinions of his colleagues that was quite new and refreshing. It startled the Upper House senators, and made them disposed to humour the Hon. Robert in order to prevent such outbursts in the future. To be actually told to their faces by one of their own number that they were neither use nor ornament was a new sensation, and not of a pleasant kind. Moreover, several members—those who had consciences—felt that there might be some grounds for the accusation. This did not make the unpleasant speech the more palatable.

If the truth must be told, Robert Briscoe detested the Upper House, and never went near it when he could possibly stay away. In this respect he was not alone. It pleased his daughter, however, that he should occupy the position, so he groaned and sighed when he had to leave her at Yeronga and journey to Sydney.

Yeronga Station was a magnificent property, and its situation within easy distance of the western city of Bathurst made it the more valuable. The homestead was in a lovely spot, secluded, quiet and peaceful. In a hollow it lay nestled and surrounded with rich pasture land, whilst in the distance could be seen range after

range of rocky mountain peaks and undulating forest land. The hospitality of Yeronga was proverbial. Strangers visiting the place received a hearty welcome. Friends came and went as they pleased. Life was by no means lonely at Yeronga. Sportsmen knew what they could get there, and the wild duck shooting was the best in the district. On the marsh land hundreds of these birds congregated, and the result of a day amongst them generally meant a good bag.

The black mare Tilly Briscoe was riding was the gift of a neighbouring squatter, who admired the Hon. Robert's daughter, although she treated him in the most off-hand manner. A thoroughbred beauty was Coal Queen, and Tilly was proud of the new acquisition to her stud.

"Nearly had the better of me, Fred," she said as almost out of breath she laughed at Fred Martin, who stood looking at her with undisguised admiration.

"She'd have a job to do that, Miss Tilly," said Fred. "But she's a dangerous customer, although she is a beauty. You handled her splendidly. There's not another girl in the West could sit that mare like you do, Miss Tilly," he went on enthusiastically.

"Don't pay compliments, Fred. There are plenty of girls can ride quite as well as I can, but for all that I'd like them to have a try at Coal Queen."

"Shall I help you, Miss Tilly," said Fred. "Thanks," she said, and putting one hand on the strong man's shoulder, she leapt lightly down, whilst an attendant caught hold of the mare's head.

Not tall by any means Miss Tilly Briscoe. As she patted the mare she looked quite small beside her. But such a dainty figure. As she gathered up her riding habit and took the hat Fred handed to her the man

thought he had never seen such a picture of healthful youth and beauty in his life. He sighed as he thought some fortunate swain would one day receive her heart.

All the hands on the station were respectfully in love with Miss Tilly. She had no false pride about her. Some town-bred, over-schooled, and over-pampered girls would have called her bad style, and have said she was too fast and forward. Tilly was nothing of the kind. She was an open-hearted, free-handed, generous girl of eighteen, with a liberal idea of the rights of others, and a wish to make all around her happy. Not a thought of evil ever crossed the girl's pure mind. She was heart free, and no man had as yet even aroused the maiden feelings within her. She hated town life, and loved the pure country air. To gallop a score miles at high speed, inhaling the breeze and feeling the high-mettled steed bounding under her, was the delight of Tilly's heart. She had no fear. She rode for miles completely alone, and without a thought of harm coming to her. It would have gone hard with the man that attempted to stop Miss Briscoe if she had her heavy whip with her, which she knew so well how to use. An athletic girl, and with muscles well tempered by constant, vigorous exercise. She could shoot, and she could ride a jumper over a five-barred gate. She could play "crib," with the Hon. Bob, and ride round a mob of cattle. She could play the piano well, and sing with her pure, fresh voice in a half-cultivated style. At pistol shooting she was also able to hold her own, and Fred declared that if it were necessary to swim a creek she'd do it, and chance the consequences. Her accomplishments were perhaps rather out of the ordinary routine of a young lady's education, but they suited

her, and she was none the worse, but all the better for them.

Society dowagers held up their hands in horror when they heard her discourse coolly about "setting Coal Queen at the log fence" or "potting a duck first barrel," or "scouring round the country with Fred, the stock-man." These pious dames with marriageable daughters thought Miss Briscoe a very forward young woman indeed. "Makes herself too free with the men, you know," was their remark. Perhaps she did in their eyes, but she never asked to be put up for auction and sold to the highest bidder as some of these same society dames did with their daughters.

Lady Worthington said Tilly Briscoe was "a fine girl, but it was a pity she allowed men to take liberties with her. Poor child, she has no regard for the proprieties of society." And Lady Worthington was a judge, because she treated her legal lord like a dog, and her liaisons with fashionable men were well known.

Tilly knew none of these things. She was always in a hurry to return to Yeronga, and very often her father went to Sydney alone.

"Where have you been, Tilly?" said a tall, well-made woman, who had been handsome once, as the girl came singing into the house. "I declare you frightened the life out of me. You'll break your neck some day. I don't know what your father will say. He made me promise I would not let you ride that mare."

"Did he, indeed? Well, you dear, darling, good old dumps, you see I have ridden the mare, and fancy you attempting to stop me," said Tilly, laughing.

"Good gracious! Tilly, do behave," said Miss Rowton. "How can you pull me about in this fashion? Recollect you are not a child now."

"Yes I am, dumps, I'm a real infant. You can take me in hand once more, Rowy. Don't look glum. You're the best creature in the world, bar the Honourable Robert, and you know I mean it," said Tilly.

Miss Rowton held up her hands in horror.

"Tilly, I beg of you not to speak of your father in that manner. What horrid words you use. 'Rowy,' dumps,' 'bar.' Really, Tilly, one would think I had sadly neglected your education. It's that horrid man, Fred Martin. He uses dreadful slang."

"No, he doesn't, Rowy dear," said Tilly. "Fred's a real good fellow. He says I'm the best rider out West, and there's nobody to beat our Miss Tilly."

"That's just it, my dear. The man encourages you. I shall have to speak to your father about it," said Miss Rowton.

"Tell dear old dad. Why, he'll laugh at you, Rowy," said Tilly, as she gave a slight waltz round.

"I believe he would, my dear," sighed Miss Rowton. "He takes very little notice of anything I say when it concerns you; but he's a good man is Robert Briscoe, although I say it."

"He is! he is! he is! You dear, delightful Rowy," and Tilly placed her arm around the waist of her companion, and whirled her around the room.

"Stop, please, Tilly. Really, I'm quite out of breath. Let me go. Oh!" said Miss Rowton, as she sank into a chair exhausted. "You'll be the death of me, Tilly, I know you will. I'm not so young as I used to be."

"Listen to me, Rowy," said Tilly, with a merry twinkle in her eye. "I believe Fred Martin's hit. I'm sure of it. Why don't you give the man a chance?"

"I presume, Tilly, you are alluding to myself in con-

nection with Fred Martin. I'm ashamed of you. Don't mention such things, you silly girl," said Miss Rowton.

Tilly pursed up her pretty lips and gave an unmistakable whistle.

"I'll not offend you, Rowy, indeed I won't. When will father be home?"

"To-morrow, Tilly. The post came while you were out. He only sent a few lines. Said he would be here in the morning, and that he's bringing a 'new hand' with him."

"What's that for?" said Tilly. "I didn't know we wanted any more hands. I suppose he's an extra good one. Well, I hope he rides well and that he's not an awful bore."

"I have no doubt your father will choose a respectable man," said Miss Rowton.

"Probably, Miss Demure, but I like real good fellows about. They're all the better with a dash of the scamp in them," she laughed.

"I hope we shall have no scamps about here, Tilly," said Miss Rowton.

"Look, look," said Tilly, excitedly pointing towards the door.

Miss Rowton looked and saw that Coal Queen refused to be unsaddled, and was plunging and rearing about the yard in the most extraordinary manner.

Fred Martin had hold of her head, and a man attempted to ungirth her. It was no use, the mare was becoming more and more savage.

"I'll soon settle her," said Tilly.

"I beg you will not go near that dangerous animal, Tilly," said Miss Rowton, alarmed.

"But I shall," said Tilly, as she gripped her heavy hunting-whip, and with a firm step went into the yard,

"Let me have her, Fred ; she knows me," she said.

"Don't come near her, Miss," said Fred. "She's just fit to lash a man's brains out. Dash the brute," he shouted, as the mare hit out with her fore feet and struck him down all of a heap.

In his fall he let go of the bridle. The mare turned on the fallen man like a tiger, and in another moment would have had her teeth in his arm.

Quick as a bird Tilly rushed in, and raising her whip struck the mare a heavy blow between the eyes with the butt. She stood over the prostrate form of Fred Martin like a perfect Diana.

The mare staggered, looked dazed, and then made a second attempt to reach Fred. Down came the heavy whip again, and this time it kept Coal Queen at bay.

Tilly went up to the mare and took hold of the bridle. The mare looked at her savagely for a moment and then quieted down, and her mistress led her away to the stable. Fred scrambled to his feet. He felt stiff and sore, but was not much hurt. He met Tilly, and respectfully put out his hand.

"May I shake hands with you, Miss Tilly. I believe you saved my life. Thank you," he said simply.

She gave him a tiny hand, which he clasped with a fervent pressure in his heavy fist. How soft and warm it felt, and yet a minute before it had struck a terrible blow.

"It was nothing, Fred," she said. "You were in no danger. Don't thank me at all. It was a mercy I was there, though."

"Miss Tilly, you're a noble girl. No wonder we call you the 'pride of the station,'" he said.

"Do they call me that, Fred? Well, tell all hands that I'm proud of the title, and will always endeavour to

deserve it," she said, with a glow of pleasure on her handsome face.

"Tilly, I thought you were killed," said Miss Rowton. "That fearful animal! You must never ride it again."

"Don't talk nonsense, Rowy. You need not tell father about this, it would only trouble him," said Tilly.

"It is my duty to tell him," said Miss Rowton.

"It is your duty, Rowy, to save my father from anxiety about horse affairs. You won't tell him, will you, Rowy, dear?" this with an affectionate kiss.

"Promise you won't do it again," said Miss Rowton.

"With pleasure, for I don't expect I shall ever have such another opportunity of distinguishing myself," laughed Tilly.

Fred Martin watched Tilly's pretty figure until it disappeared inside the house. He turned away with a sigh as he murmured, "There's nobody like her. There never was a girl like our Miss Tilly."

CHAPTER II.

A NEW HAND.

CURIOUS men in curious positions are to be found in Australia. Men who have had reverses of fortune in the old land and come out to the new to retrieve them. Wild, harem-scarum sons, well bred, well educated, shipped first saloon by a P and O. steamer to Australia, with a draft for a couple of hundred in their pockets with which to start life. They generally start by having a "new-chum spree" and getting speedily rid of the lot.

They then turn to and find work. And some of these idle, ne'er-do-wells at home turn out real good fellows. They work with a will, and don't object to what the work is. Rare hands at mining some of them; useful hands on a station others. There are, of course, men who will never do well anywhere; men who have a decided disinclination for work, and who go from bad to worse. The colonies want none such, they want the best men England can spare them. The habitual loafer is a nuisance. He's a pest swarming on society with as much destruction as a swarm of caterpillars in a vineyard. You can see the "loafer" any day in Sydney or Melbourne. He's always got some spare cash. Perhaps he gets a remittance from home, and more shame to those who sent it him. Drink is his God, and mankind—no, not mankind, he hasn't the nerve for that—but womankind, are his lawful prey. There are men in the big Australian cities really hard up, and desirous of work and unable to find it; men who have seen better days in the old land, and perhaps, through no fault of their own, come to grief; men who have been hard hit, so to speak, and are unable to make a recovery. Refined, well-educated men, some of them; hiding under a shabbily dressed exterior the feelings of a gentleman. Men who would scorn to do a mean action or take undue advantage of a fellow man. These men may be scarce, but there are such; and Rolf Standish was one of them.

He came of a good family. His father had been a great Manchester merchant prince, a cotton lord. But the crash came. In the collapse of a great house many minor houses were ruined, and Standish & Co. had to go to the wall. The big house which caused so many failures was thought to be as financially secure as the Bank of England. False safety. The great house of

Collier & Co. toppled over, and with it came Standish & Co. and several smaller firms. And then the bubble burst. Collier & Co. were swindlers, men who had lived like princes and given banquets at which Nero would have smiled or the beautiful, lascivious Cleopatra bidden Antony come and feast. Men who drove magnificent horses and spent fabulous sums of money. Creditors might howl with rage, families might be ruined. No matter, Collier & Co. must have their fling. And when the crash came they were missing. Liabilities three millions, assets a mere trifle. Gone, clean gone! The senior partner bolted with enough spoil to keep him in luxury, and he never was found. Old Randolph Standish could not stand the disgrace that fell upon his house. He tried to bear up. He gave up all he possessed to his creditors. He beggared himself and his family, and people said he was a fool. Randolph Standish was no fool, he was an honourable man trying to pay his just debts. And he did it. He paid the uttermost farthing. Had his creditors waited he might have weathered the storm. But they would not wait. Collier & Co. had been quite enough for them. Standish & Co. might serve them a similar trick. So these insatiable creditors, the half of which would probably have swindled Standish by selling him inferior goods if they could, determined to bring matters to a crisis. Randolph Standish met them like a man. He explained that, through no fault of his own, this blow had come upon his house. They could take all he had. They should be paid pound for pound. And they were paid, and the Standishes were ruined. The old man did not long survive the blow. He died of a broken heart, and was buried in a quiet spot in a pretty country churchyard. Rolf Standish, as he stood over the grave,

vowed a solemn oath that if ever he met the man who had ruined his father it should go hard with him. At the moment he would, without remorse, have consigned the whole Collier family to perdition. Rolf hardly knew what to do. A distant relative took charge of his sister, Maude Standish, but said it was clearly Rolf's duty to shift for himself. Rolf acknowledged it was, but said he hardly knew how to commence.

"Go to Australia, and try your fortune there," was the advice his relative gave him. "I'll pay your passage, my lad, and give you a few pounds to start with. You've been hard hit, Rolf, but you'll get over it. Pull yourself together, lad. There never was a Standish yet that did not succeed."

Rolf took the money as a loan and sailed for Melbourne. He had a rough time of it there, and could make no headway. Too much of a gentleman most people thought as they looked at him when he asked for work. He came on to Sydney, but had no better luck. Try as hard as he could, and heaven knows he tried hard enough, no work could he obtain. Week after week passed and still no work. His funds were exhausted. What must he do? He went down Macquarie Street and watched the members going to Parliament House. Why he went there it would have been difficult to say. Probably, because like many of our legislators he had nothing to do. If he'd been asked to legislate at the rate of three hundred per annum he'd have accepted the offer straight off and thought it no disgrace. He wasn't ashamed of hard work, and he might, in his ignorance, have fancied he would have had to work hard for his money.

Rolf lolled against a lamp-post. He was not seedy-looking, but there was a pinched expression about his face that meant hunger if it meant anything.

The Hon. Robert Briscoe was coming to the house. He was inwardly muttering strong language because he had to be there at all. He'd have given a fiver to stop at his club. But he was wanted for a division. It was important the President said, and the Hon. Bob must be in his place.

"But hang it all," said the irreverent, yet Hon. Robert Briscoe, "if I do come and we do win, what on earth's the use. If we throw out the Bill those beggars in the other place (ye gods! what an insult), will just send it back again and tell us if it's not passed they'll sit and 'widdle their thumbs and do no business until it is."

The President remonstrated. He didn't think it was as bad as that.

"But I tell you it is," said the Hon. Robert. "Well, I'll come. But mind you, I clear to-morrow. No more delays. If that Bill don't get thrown out to-night I shan't stop to help throw it out. I don't know exactly what it's about. It is a measure, I understand, you don't approve of. Well, I'll vote straight, blest if I don't. and then to-morrow I pack up and once more make for Yeronga and Tilly."

And so the Hon. Bob is prevailed upon to do his duty manfully. He strolled down Macquarie Street. Suddenly he stopped. "Dash it all, I don't believe I brought any money out with me." He felt in his trousers pocket. None there. Then in his breast coat pocket. He opened his pocket-book. Something fluttered to the ground. He didn't see, but he had got nearly opposite to Rolf Standish and he saw it.

"What a nuisance. Haven't a red cent. I'll borrow some of 'Rockey'."

Rolf picked up the paper and opened it mechanically. It was a hundred-pound note.

Wealth. What wealth to a starving man. A hundred pounds. What could he not do with it. The thoughts were put back in a second. With the note in his hand he hurried after the Hon. Bob.

"Excuse me, sir, you dropped this."

"Eh," said Robert Briscoe. "Dropped what?"

"This, sir," said Rolf, handing him the note.

The Hon. Robert took it. He looked at the note and then at Rolf.

"It fell out of your pocket-book I fancy, sir," said Rolf.

"You're an honest fellow. Why didn't you keep it?"

"Because it was not mine."

"You found it?"

"Yes, but I knew the owner."

"Here's a ——. Hang it all, I've no change," said the Hon. Robert. "Probably you think that's a crammer. Well, it isn't. Bob Briscoe, of Yeronga Station, without a sov. for a stranger." And he laughed at the idea.

"I would not accept anything, sir," said Rolf. "I merely did my duty." He staggered a little as though he was faint; and, truth to tell, he was, for he had eaten very little all day.

"What ails you, man?" said Briscoe. "Blest if I don't think it's hunger," he muttered, as he looked at the wan face.

"I'm not well," said Rolf.

"No, you're not. Here, come inside with me," and the Hon. Robert Briscoe led the way to the bar of the house—not the great bar, but the refreshment bar.

He forced a couple of glasses of brandy into Rolf, and was about to speak when a gentleman came rapidly in and whispered to him.

"'Gad, I forgot. Stay here a minute." And off he ran, leaving Rolf alone.

He was back in a very short time.

"Just did it," he said. "Near go, by Jove!" But I threw it out. Blest if I didn't throw it out."

"Throw what out?" mildly enquired Rolf.

"The Bill, man. The Bill."

"Oh," said Rolf, with a vacant look. He fancied the Hon. Robert must be a little off it.

"My vote did it. Majority of one. Come along." It then dawned upon Rolf that he was speaking to an eminent legislator, and that the Bill was not a "bill of fare," or an "unpaid bill," but a Parliamentary Bill."

Calling a cab, Briscoe made Rolf get inside with him, and they drove to an hotel.

Here the worthy squatter insisted upon Rolf having a "good square meal," that was the expression he used, before they had a talk.

"Now, look here," said Briscoe, when Rolfe had finished; "a man that can pick up a hundred-pound note when he's famishing, and hasn't the means to appease his hunger, and deliver that note to its lawful owner, I say that man's out of the common. What's your name, eh?"

Rolf hesitated a minute. Then he said, "Randolph Smith, sir."

The Hon. Bob winked his eye and' looked wise. He hit it in a minute. "Don't like to give his real name," he thought. "Man like that never had a name like Smith." Aloud he said, "Smith, eh? Heard that name before. Randolph, eh? What's short for it?"

"Rolf, sir."

"That's better. Well, Rolf Smith, what can I do for you?"

Rolf brightened up considerably. Here was a chance at last. If this kind gentleman would only give him work

"Can you give me any work?" said Rolf.

"Work! Gad, yes. Heaps of work if you want it. I'm Robert Briscoe, of Yeronga Station, and if there's any work I can give you, my lad, I'll do it."

The Hon. Robert had taken a great fancy to Rolf. He liked the look of the young fellow, and he had had a good test of his honesty. "He's a gentleman," thought Robert, "every inch of him. Wonder what's brought him down? Must have had a rough time of it. Gambling? No; he doesn't look like that. Girls? Must have been a woman. No, it wasn't. Well, he's been hard hit somehow, but that's not my business."

"Thank you," said Rolf. "Work on a station would be the very thing for me. I hate town life."

"Can you ride?" said Briscoe.

Rolf's eyes sparkled. He had been a great rider to hounds in the halcyon days at home when his father had provided the means for his stay at Melton during the hunting season. How he would like to be on the back of a good horse again.

"I used to ride well," he said; "I have ridden a good deal to hounds ——" Then he checked himself and blushed, actually blushed.

The Hon. Robert laughed.

"You let your tongue slip there, young 'un. Never mind. I don't want to know who and what you are. You are an honest fellow, that's enough for me. You shall come with me to Yeronga to-morrow, and we'll soon find out if you can ride. I want a good man there as general superintendent."

He didn't want anything of the kind; but that did not matter to Robert Briscoe.

"How can I thank you?" said Rolf.

"By having a drink," said Briscoe, as he rang the bell.

"I've never been on a station," said Rolf. "I shall be strange at first, but I'll work hard."

"Plenty for a young man like you to do there. It'll be your own fault if you don't get on. I wonder what Tilly will say? 'Another new hand, dad. We shall have a regiment here soon.' Yes, that's about what she'll say?"

"Who's Tilly, I wonder," thought Rolf.

And so it came about that Rolf Standish, formerly heir to the wealth and the house of Standish & Co., was engaged by the Hon. Robert Briscoe, of Yeronga Station. Had the Hon. Robert not dropped that £100 note, and had not Rolf Standish been in Macquarie Street to pick it up, this story would never have been written.

What eventful circumstances hinged upon the finding of that note remain to be seen. It is wonderful what may come out of one slight incident.

"Here we are, jump out," said Briscoe, as the train pulled up with a jerk at a small station, where it had been stopped for the Hon. Robert, who never paid any fare in his capacity as legislator, to alight.

Rolf got out, and in a few minutes they were bowling along the road in a buggy and pair, with Fred Martin seated behind.

It was a beautiful morning, and Rolf thought what a lovely country it was as the buggy whirled rapidly along.

"How's all at the house, Fred?" asked the Hon. Bob.

"Miss Tilly's as splendid as ever, sir, and Miss Rowton just as usual. The black mare's the very devil, and Tim's hurt his leg. Stock all well, and ducks plentiful," said Fred.

Rolf laughed. He couldn't help it. The man's manner was so quaint.

"Fred, this is Rolf Smith, a new hand I've got. I hope you two'll be friends. I stand no humbug at my place."

The men shook hands, and the grip was a hearty one.

The country became wilder now. Rocks and crags on either side of the road, and the ruts and stumps made the jolting somewhat unpleasant. A real rough country. Suddenly, without warning the buggy shot through as if it were a high rock split asunder and a road made between. Then a magnificent panorama burst on Rolf's view. For miles around lay rich land all cleared and stumped. At about a couple of miles distant he saw a house nestling in the valley.

"What a lovely place," he exclaimed.

"That's Yeronga," said the Hon. Robert with pride. "It is a lovely place, and by Jove, don't I love it."

On they went. Now the horses were whipped up and put at a hard gallop. They dashed up the well-made road and pulled up with a jerk.

The Hon. Robert sprang down, and flung the reins to Rolf, and in another minute he held Tilly in his arms.

Rolf got quietly down and stood with the reins in his hand. "What a lovely girl," he thought. "Beautiful! Oh, she is beautiful!"

"Now, Tilly, let's have a look at you," said her father as he held her at arm's length.

"As pretty as ever," he said with a fond smile. "God bless you, darling; I'm glad to be home again."

"And I'm so glad to see you, dear old dad," she said, as she gave him another hearty kiss.

"I must introduce you, Tilly. This is a new hand—Rolf Smith," he said.

Rolf raised his hat and bowed, but Tilly held out her hand and said :

"Welcome to Yeronga. We never make strangers of our——" she was going to say men, but something in Rolf's gentlemanly face and figure stopped her, and she said "new hands."

"Thank you, Miss Briscoe. This is the heartiest welcome I have had for many a long day," he said.

"Poor fellow," she thought. "Down on his luck, I suppose."

That night Robert Briscoe told his daughter and Miss Rowton how he came to engage his new hand, and Rolf became quite a hero in Tilly's eyes.

"What an honourable thing for him to do, father," she said as he finished his yarn.

"Yes, it was, Tilly. He's a good young fellow, let him be who or what he may."

Rolf slept soundly that night, but Tilly's beautiful face seemed strangely visible to him in his dreams.

CHAPTER III.

LIFE AT YERONGA STATION.

LIFE at Yeronga Station to Rolf Standish, after the privations and trials he had gone through, was perfect bliss. At last he thought he had found a haven of rest, and he was thankful for the chance meeting with Robert Briscoe, which had turned out so advantageously. Station life was a new experience for Rolf, but it was exactly the kind of life he liked. Free and easy. Up

early and riding miles in the pure fresh morning air, his horse's hoofs brushing the sparkling dew from the grass, and the mist rising before him like a thin silken cloud. How he enjoyed those early gallops. The horses at Yeronga were first-class animals. Blood on either one side or the other, sometimes on both. He had the pick of the stable, and he selected the horses that could carry him for miles without a halt.

Everyone at Yeronga liked Rolf. There was something about him they could hardly understand. He gave himself no airs, and yet there was a kind of natural superiority about him that denotes the well bred, well educated man. All the hands at Yeronga were loud in their praises of Rolf. They were not jealous of him because he was constantly in the station home with the Briscoes.

"It comes natural to him," said Fred Martin. "He's a cut above us coves, though he never shows it. I like the fellow. He's straight and plenty of pluck. He can ride as well as any man on the station, and in time he'll be the best hand among us. You can do as you like, mates, but I stick to him."

And so Fred calmly yielded the post of authority to Rolf. How it was done no one could tell. Rolf himself was hardly sensible of the change, but it seemed to come natural to him to take the lead. Briscoe saw it, and smiled. He knew that in Rolf he had secured a man in a thousand.

Strange that it never struck the Hon. Robert that Rolf was a fine-looking, dashing young fellow, and that Tilly was one of the most beautiful girls on the Western side.

He knew these two facts separately, but he never connected them. Besides was not Richard Rushton, a rich and in every way a desirable man, devotedly attached

to Tilly, and would make her a good husband when she thought fit to accept him.

The Hon. Robert would never have forced his daughter to do anything against her will, much less marry a man she could not care for.

And so Rolf became almost one of the family, and Miss Rowton declared he was the most polite and best educated young man she had ever seen at Yeronga.

She took Rolf under her motherly wing, and there could be no doubt the good soul was very fond of him. She found a bond of sympathy lay between them. They were both unfortunates, and had had their lives and hopes dashed. Intuitively Miss Rowton felt that Rolf was a man who could do great things if he got an opportunity. She meant to do all she could in her way to assist him.

Rolf had a firm way with him, and he seldom lost his temper with either man or horse.

See him this bright, fine, sunny morning. He has just returned from a gallop round the home pastures, and is grooming down his horse. Quite the bushman's costume. Arms bared, and his face glowing with health, he worked at his horse with a will, and the gentle "shoo shoo" that accompanied each smack with the cloth denoted he was thoroughly in earnest about his business. No sluggard was Rolf. He put in half an hour's good solid work at the horse until Testator's coat shone like satin.

"There, you beauty, I think that's polished you off. One more rub down and you're done," and the cloth went over the sleek coat, not too heavily this time, but just enough to put the final gloss on.

Then Rolf put his hands on his hips with his elbows spreadeagled and looked at his work. Testator glanced

round at him and his eyes seemed to say, "Thanks, I feel more comfortable after that."

"I've licked you into shape, old boy, since I came here," said Rolf. "You look as if you could jump a bit. I'll give you a go at one or two of those stiff bullfinches before long. Log fences I suppose would be more correct. Never mind so long as you get over and don't break my neck and your own, it won't matter much. Heigho, I don't fancy it would matter much if I did break mine. It's deuced little use to anyone but the owner." The top of Rolf's rough shirt was open and showed a shapely neck and a manly chest. A pity to break a neck like that, most men would have thought.

Rolf stood looking at Testator and did not notice the figure behind him.

Tilly had been gazing earnestly at him for fully five minutes. How charming she was in her white loose morning dress and her dainty straw hat; her hair streaming down her back, and a handful of freshly gathered flowers. A pretty picture of a rustic maiden.

Rolf turned round, and with a start saw her standing before him. It was evident she had been watching him. He coloured as he said :

"Good morning, Miss Briscoe. I had no idea I had a spectator of my work. I hope it has been done to your satisfaction."

"Quite," she said, smiling. "I could almost do my hair up with Testator's shining coat for a glass. What wonders you have worked with that horse. He was a perfect demon when you came here."

"Nearly as bad as Coal Queen," he said.

"You let Coal Queen alone, Mr. Rolf. My mare is far superior to Testator. They cannot be compared."

"Indeed. I don't think so, Miss Briscoe. I prefer Testator," he said.

"Don't contradict," she said, and stamped her pretty foot with an amusingly authoritative air. "I'm boss here, and I mean to have my own way."

He smiled. "You generally have that, Miss Briscoe," he said. "Who could help letting you have your own way," with a sudden burst of admiration he could not suppress.

Tilly looked at him. "Do you think I was born to have my own way?" she said.

"You were born with the Hon. Robert Briscoe for your father, and that means the same thing," he replied.

"I believe dear old dad would do anything for me," she said.

"I'm sure of it, Miss Briscoe. Don't ask him for anything that is not good for you," he said.

"Don't preach to me, Rolf. I hate being preached at, and I won't be preached at. I shan't stand it," she said, petulantly.

"Hate. Won't. Shan't. That's pretty fair for a beginning," laughed Rolf.

Tilly felt as though she would have liked to smack his face, but she said :

"You're the only person ever lectures me. Never mind, I'll forgive you this time. Come and look at Coal Queen."

A handsome pair, thought Fred Martin with a sigh, as he saw them cross the yard to the Queen's box.

"Now, deny that she's a beauty," said Tilly, as she threw open the door.

The mare showed the whites of her eyes, and laid back her ears in an unmistakably antagonistic manner. She

was a beauty, there could be no doubt about it. One fault, and a bad one, she was vicious.

"She's a gem, Miss Briscoe, but I don't like to see you ride her. She's not a lady's mare. She wants a man on her back with a nerve like iron, and a good whip hand to flog some of the nonsense out of her. I'm afraid she'll injure you some day."

"She goes with me quite easily," said Tilly. "I had a lot of trouble with her at first."

"Would you like to ride her, Rolf. I'll let you try her to-morrow. I fancy she can fence well."

"I'll try her, Miss Briscoe, if you wish," he said, "I'm afraid she'll find me rather a hard master after you. Why do you want me to ride her?"

"Because you're the only man about the place can handle a horse properly. You've delicate hands and a good seat. You look a model on a horse. You——" She stopped short. Something told her she was praising her father's new hand too much, and treating him as an equal. Rolf heard her, and her voice and the earnest ring in it made his pulses tingle. But he took no notice, and said calmly:

"I'm glad I have earned your encomiums, Miss Briscoe, because they are worth having. You ride so well yourself."

"Do you think so?" she said.

"I never saw a woman ride so well, and I have seen some good ones."

At breakfast Tilly told her father that Rolf was to ride Coal Queen and see if she could jump.

"I don't envy him the task," said Robert. "But there, you are a good rider, Rolf. I shall have to go to Sydney for a few days soon, so I must leave you in charge here. Will you go, Tilly?"

"No ; thanks, dad. I'll stop and keep Miss Rowton company, won't I, Rowy ?"

"As you like, dear. I think the trip to Sydney would do you good," said Miss Rowton.

Tilly laughed. She was in perfect health, and could despise trips for the purpose of recruiting.

"I'll do my best while you are away," said Rolf. "Shall you be long absent, sir."

"No, lad, not more than a week this time," he said.

"I'm so glad, father. A week is a long time when you are away," said Tilly.

That night Rolf was in the dining-room, and Tilly was playing the piano. Suddenly she stopped, and looking at him said :

"Can you play the piano, Rolf. You seem able to do most things."

"I used to play," he said, "but it is a long time since I touched the keys. I don't think I could play at all now."

He did not see anything out of the common in her asking him if he could play, although he was only a station hand.

Tilly bounded from her seat and ran out of the room. She returned with her father, and said laughingly :

"Rolf has another accomplishment, dad. He plays the piano. Ask him to play. I want to hear him."

"So you play, do you, Rolf ? Tilly wants a tune, no doubt you will oblige."

"I'll try my best, sir," said Rolf, and he sat down at the piano. He was not a brilliant player, but he had a good ear, and could rattle off pieces from memory.

He commenced with a dreamy waltz air, and gradually becoming absorbed in his occupation, he forgot almost that any one was present in the room. He changed the

tune. Then he commenced the air to Melville's song, "The place where the old horse died," and then the thought of the scenes he had taken part in overcame his feelings, and he sang in a somewhat loud but not unmelodious voice the well-known hunting song, "A good one to follow, a bad one to beat."

Tilly held her breath. The Hon. Robert beat time with his foot. Miss Rowton came into the room and gazed with amazement at Rolf. At the last verse Tilly could restrain herself no longer, and joined heartily in the chorus.

This started Rolf and brought him back out of dream-land.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I forgot where I was."

"No excuses Rolf," said Briscoe heartily. "Gad man, that's a stirring song."

"Thank you so much," said Tilly, "what a grand song. I fancied I was careering over the country with Coal Queen and the pack streaming ahead of me and no one in sight. Sing another, Rolf. Make him sing another, dad."

And Rolf complied, and a very pleasant evening was spent.

Rolf had never felt so happy for years. He was at home in this hospitable house. He would not have changed his place at Yeronga for a fortune. He asked himself why. What was it made him so happy. Here he was a dependent upon another man's estate. Then the image of Tilly rose before him, and he thought how lovely she was. Had that anything to do with his happiness, and his wish to stay at Yeronga? He was fain to confess it had. But what right had he in his present position to aspire to the—no, he would not think of it. It would be an act of treachery to the kind-hearted man

who had brought him into his home a stranger, and treated him like a son. It would be base ingratitude for him to think of Tilly Briscoe other than as the daughter of his master. He must treat her with more respect. He must not be familiar with her. She called him Rolf, and the name sounded sweet from her lips. She called all the men by their Christian names, so there could be nothing in that. No, sooner than betray his trust he would leave Yeronga, although it would be a bitter blow for him to do so. She was young, beautiful, and innocent. It was clearly his duty to keep a widely marked difference between their respective positions. And what Rolf saw to be his duty he meant to do. There are times, however, when a man's passions overcome him. When he loves deeply and the temptations are great, he occasionally falls, be he ever so strong. Rolf felt he would not fail. He would stifle all his feelings whatever opportunities he had. To be alone for hours with a beautiful girl for a companion was, he felt, enough to tempt an angel to his fall.

The Hon. Robert Briscoe left for Sydney, and Rolf was in charge of the station. His time was fully occupied, and he saw very little of Tilly and Miss Rowton.

Tilly somehow felt he avoided her. What had she done. How had she offended him. Had she not been kind and considerate to him. She did not mention her feelings to Miss Rowton, but she determined to ask Rolf what he meant by it. She liked Rolf better than the other men on the station, but that was all. She could hardly define her feelings towards him as yet. That time was to come.

And so she asked Rolf on the first opportunity why he avoided her.

He made excuses, and said he was so busy now her

father was away. He would, however, be more attentive in the future. He was sorry he had offended her.

"You have not offended me, Rolf," she said. "I thought I had offended you. I'm glad it is not so. Will you ride Coal Queen for me to-morrow? You have not done so yet. The mare is getting a little too powerful for me, and you'll take that viciousness out of her."

"I'll try, Miss Briscoe. I'll ride her to-morrow, and you shall see the gallop. I'll take her over those fences first," and he pointed to several hurdles which had been erected in a large paddock in front of the house to exercise the horses over, for there were several good hurdlers and steeplechasers at Yeronga.

"That will do," she said. "Be sure you don't forget."

"I'll not forget, Miss Briscoe. Coal Queen can jump, or I never saw a mare that could clear a fence before," he said.

That ride on Coal Queen was fated to be eventful.

CHAPTER IV

A RIDE ON COAL QUEEN.

"TAKE her steady at first, Rolf," said Fred Martin, as Rolf Standish, mounted on Coal Queen, was passing out of the yard into the jumping ground. "She's a devil of a temper, and if she takes it into her head, she might do a bolt with you, and that would be nasty."

"All right, Fred. She'll have her work cut out if she gets the better of me. I'll——"

The mare gave a plunge, and cut short his answer. It was evident Coal Queen was not in the best of tempers.

"I'll take that out of you, my lady, before I've done," said Rolf.

He sat the mare splendidly, and Tilly, on the verandah with Miss Rowton, thought how well he looked.

"Don't you think Coal Queen's a beauty, Rowy?" she said.

"A very dangerous animal, Tilly. I wonder your father allows you to ride her," was the reply.

Tilly waved her hand to Rolf, who doffed his hat, and then he set to work with the mare. He cantered her two or three times round the track, and let her sidle gently up to the first hurdles.

Coral Queen stood still and examined the obstacle. She sniffed at it, and snorted, and did not at all understand what her rider meant. Rolf took her back, and, cantering her gently along, set her at the hurdles.

She refused point blank, and switched round sharply. The sudden twist would have unseated any but the most experienced rider.

"He sits her well, Rowy," said Tilly.

"It's very dangerous. I hope he will not get hurt," said Miss Rowton.

"And I hope the mare won't," said Tilly, defiantly.

This time Rolf met with better success, for Coal Queen, taking well off, cleared the hurdles with a splendid leap, and landed neatly.

"Bravo," cried Tilly, as she clapped her hands; "she flew it like a bird. I'm so glad she can jump."

Coal Queen seemed to like the exercise. Rolf set her at the hurdles several times and she never baulked. Then he thought he would try a hand-gallop, and see if she would fly the fence. He sent the mare at a good pace twice round the track. The third time he rode straight on, and Tilly saw he was going to attempt the boundary fence.

Her face became suddenly pale, and she clutched at the verandah rails.

"Tilly, what's the matter?" said Miss Rowton, alarmed, "are you not well, dear?"

"Oh, Rowy, he's forgotten," said Tilly, gaspingly.

"Forgotten what?" said Miss Rowton.

"The fence; it's wired on the other side. If the mare doesn't clear it there'll be a spill."

Miss Rowton turned mechanically to watch the leap.

On went Rolf, Coal Queen going at a good pace. He had indeed forgotten the wire. He set the mare at the obstacle, and she rose at it willingly; but she did not jump far enough, and catching her fore feet in the treacherous wires she rolled head over heels and came with a terrible crash on to Rolf, who little dreamt of the dangerous experiment he had tried.

Coal Queen struggled to her feet and galloped off, making in the direction of the house. It was evident the mare had escaped severe injury, though how was a mystery.

Rolf lay motionless on the ground. He never stirred; he lay still as death.

A piercing shriek from the verandah attracted Fred Martin's attention, and looking in that direction he saw Tilly fall back into Miss Rowton's arms.

He rushed to the house and breathlessly enquired what was the matter.

"Run at once and look after Rolf. He tried to clear the outer fence and the mare caught in the wire," she said, in an agitated voice. "I can attend to Miss Briscoe."

Fred ran off as quickly as he could, calling for the other men to follow him.

Tilly was laid on the sofa. She was in a dead faint. Miss Rowton applied the usual restoratives, and presently the girl opened her eyes. The first words she said were :

"Is he hurt? Oh, Rowy, is he hurt? Tell me, quick—quick. It was all my fault. I made him ride the mare. Is he—is he—oh, Rowy," and she burst into tears.

"Be calm, dear. Fred has gone to see what's the matter. Perhaps he is only stunned," she said.

Something in Tilly's wistful eyes startled Miss Rowton. What was it? She could hardly say.

Fred reached Rolf, and found him lying quite still. He raised his head, and Rolf groaned. He had been stunned, but quickly came to his senses.

"I'm not much hurt Fred, am I?" he said. "She came a cropper and no mistake." He groaned again, "I forgot all about that wire fence. Is the mare hurt? I wouldn't have her hurt for anything."

'Keep quiet, Rolf,' said Fred. "You're hurt bad enough man. Why your left arm's broken, and—here, hold up, your head's bleeding."

Fred bound a rough handkerchief round Rolf's forehead, where there was a nasty gash, which looked as though it had been done by the mare's shoe.

Rolf sank back and groaned again. He was in great pain although he tried not to show it.

"Nothing wrong internally, I hope, Fred," he said.

"Send one of the men to tell Miss Briscoe I'm all right. She saw me fall," he said.

Fred spoke to one of the men, but instead of doing what Rolf said, he asked him to tell Miss Rowton to get some bandages ready and send off for the doctor.

The two men raised Rolf and carried him gently towards the house. It was tedious work, for he was in great pain, and every movement made his bones ache. As they neared the house his strength gave way and he fainted.

They carried him up the steps and poor Rolf looked more like a dead man than anything else.

Tilly gave one look at the pale face, with the cloth bound round the forehead, and streaks of blood trickling down the cheeks. She thought he was dead. The shock was too much. She forgot everything and everybody except that Rolf was dead.

With a wild cry she fell on her knees by his side.

"Rolf, Rolf, speak to me. Oh! he's dead," she moaned. "Rolf, look at me. No, no, I'll not believe it. He can't be dead. Give him back to me!"

Miss Rowton pulled the excited girl gently away.

"He's not dead, Tilly. He's severely hurt, and I've sent for the doctor. You must keep perfectly quiet or you will make it worse for him," she said.

"Not dead! Thank God," said Tilly, as she rose from her feet, somewhat confused. She had betrayed undue anxiety for one of her father's men.

Rolf opened his eyes and looked round. His glance rested on Tilly and he smiled faintly. "I hope the mare's not hurt, Miss Briscoe," he said, faintly. "I forgot the fence. It was very foolish of me."

Tilly looked at him, and that glance almost made him forget his pain.

"The mare's all right," she said. "But you are not. I hope you are not much hurt."

"It's a mere trifle, Miss Briscoe," he said; but he could not help a groan escaping, the pain was so intense. Tilly heard it, and her soft eyes filled with tears. She turned away her head, and hid her face.

"You must keep quiet, Rolf," said Miss Rowton. "The doctor will be here as soon as possible, and then he will tell us what is the matter."

They took Rolf to his room, and laid him tenderly on the bed.

Fred Martin set to work and quickly had his clothes off. He examined him carefully, and found the right side was much bruised. When the doctor arrived Rolf was sleeping quietly, although fitfully, and he did not rouse him. When he woke he made an examination.

No internal injuries. The head badly cut, and the left arm broken. With the assistance of Fred the arm was re-set, and he then bound up his head carefully.

"You'll be all right in a few weeks," said the kind-hearted doctor. "I'll call in and see you again tomorrow. One of your men had better ride back with me for some medicine."

As the doctor left the room he met Tilly. She put her hand on his arm, and looking at him earnestly said:

"Is he badly hurt, doctor? He's not in danger, is he?"

Doctor Broadwood looked at the beautiful, anxious face, and thought: "Bob Briscoe, you've no business to bring handsome young fellows like this into your house. It's not fair to the girl and it's not fair to them." To Tilly he said: "He wants quiet. There is no danger, Miss Briscoe. He's had a narrow escape. It's a miracle

he did not break his neck. He'll be all right in a few weeks."

"He was riding Coal Queen, doctor. She fell, oh, so heavily, and I saw it. I was quite unnerved. Very silly of me, was it not?" said Tilly.

"It would startle you. There's no danger, though. Mind he's not excited or his head might get bad."

The Hon. Robert Briscoe had been compelled to go to Melbourne, and wrote to say he could not return until a week later than he had anticipated.

"It's fate," murmured Miss Rowton, as she read the letter.

"Tilly, I wish you would let one of the maids attend to Rolf's bandages," she said. "It does not look well, your being so much with him."

"And pray what do I care for looks?" said Tilly. "I suppose I can please myself. It was my fault he was hurt, and I mean to cure him if possible."

Miss Rowton had tact on some occasions, but in the present instance she did exactly what she ought not to have done.

"I'm afraid, Tilly, you take too much interest in that young man," she said.

Tilly blushed and said angrily:

"Rubbish. I'd do exactly the same for anyone who was hurt in the way poor Rolf is."

"I don't think your father would like it, Tilly," was all Miss Rowton said.

Now Miss Rowton's innocent remarks about taking too much interest in the young man had set Tilly thinking.

What were her feelings towards Rolf?

"I like him very much," she thought. "I felt as though my heart would break when I saw them carry-

ing him up the steps. Does he like me, I wonder? I hope he does. Oh, dear, what am I thinking about! He's nothing to me, and never can be. He's one of father's station hands. That's all."

True enough. That was all.

At the end of the week Rolf got up and sat on the verandah. He was recovering rapidly. His grand constitution pulled him through quickly, and Dr. Broadwood pronounced him a wonder.

One beautiful night he sat in the cool shade, and Tilly was talking to him. Miss Rowton was busy about some household work.

"Did you feel frightened when you saw Coal Queen come a cropper?" he asked.

"Terribly. I thought you were dead. What do you think I did. I actually fainted."

"Nonsense," said Rolf; "did you? Why?"

He wished he had not asked her. The girl coloured deeply and could not help saying, "Because—because—I did not wish you to come to any harm. It would have been all my fault, you know."

"It was my abominable carelessness," he said. "I am so glad Coal Queen was not hurt. I must have another trial with her before long. Do you know, Miss Briscoe, that the mare's good enough to win a steeplechase?"

"You must not ride her again. Indeed, you must not," said Tilly.

He laughed. It was nice to hear her warn him against danger.

"I must thank you for getting me well so soon," he said. "You have been a good kind nurse. It was more than I deserved. I shall, perhaps, be able to repay

you some day. If ever you want a friend you can count upon Rolf—" and he hesitated.

"Rolf what?" she said.

"That is a secret," he said sadly.

"Tell it to me," she said, looking at him softly with her clear eyes.

Rolf did not know how he commenced, but before he had finished he had told Tilly the history of his life, and she had promised not to reveal it. There was a mutual bond—a bond of secrecy between them.

"Poor Rolf," said Tilly. "How you have suffered."

She was sitting close beside him. The charm of her manner quite overcame him. She was such a pure, innocent girl, and he felt that she—well, almost loved him.

The temptation was too great. His arm gently stole round her waist. She did not resist him, and neither spoke. Their silence was eloquent. Not a soul was present. They were utterly alone. He drew her gently towards him.

"Tilly, I have been very happy at Yeronga," he said. "I have been too happy. Shall I tell you why?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"Because I love you, Tilly."

She did not start. She lifted her eyes to his, and there was an earnest, wistful look in them.

"Tilly, my darling, I should not have told you this. Think of the wide difference between us. I am your father's station hand, nothing more. You are the daughter of a wealthy, honorable man. It is hard we should be parted, Tilly, for I feel you love me."

"I do, Rolf," she murmured, "I did not know it before, but I know it now. I do love you, Rolf."

He drew her towards him again and kissed her. The rapture of that enchanting kiss intoxicated him.

Someone else had seen that fond embrace. Miss Rowton, returning to the verandah, saw the lovers together.

She felt she had sadly neglected her duty. She made no sign, but waited until they came inside the house.

They looked guilty, but happy. Tilly's face beamed with pleasure—a new-found pleasure which gladdened her whole frame.

Wilful, wayward, spoiled and caressed Tilly loved Rolf Standish.

Miss Rowton spoke seriously to Rolf that night. She pointed out his duty to him.

How sadly he had neglected the path he had marked out for himself.

Poor Rolf. He argued with her and reasoned with her. He said Tilly loved him, and would be unhappy without him. All to no purpose. Miss Rowton was firm. Rolf must find an excuse and leave when the Hon. Robert returned.

"But why?" said Rolf. "Am I to be driven away because I honestly love her. What obstacle is there in the way?"

"There is a serious obstacle, Rolf," said Miss Rowton. "It is her father's wish, that she should marry Richard Rushton."

"Who's he?" said Rolf, and he felt he could thrash Mr. Rushton without the least remorse.

"He's a rich, handsome, well-bred man," said Miss Rowton. "He will be here next week. He comes with Mr. Briscoe."

"Does Tilly love him?" asked Rolf. "But I needn't ask that. I am sure she does not."

"She is only a girl," said Miss Rowton. "I leave it to your own honour what to do. Ask Mr. Briscoe, if you will, for his daughter, and see what he will say. Think over what I have said, Rolf. I like you better than Mr. Rushton. You must see the best course for both yourself and Tilly is to leave Yeronga before this goes too far. I will say nothing to Mr. Briscoe if you will promise me this," she said.

"I'll think over it," said Rolf, dejectedly. Now that the heat of his passion was over he felt that Miss Rowton was right, and yet it would be very hard to part with Tilly.

CHAPTER V

RICHARD RUSHTON.

ROLF gradually recovered from his accident, and the Hon. Robert Briscoe had been delayed a considerable time longer than he anticipated by business in Melbourne.

Rolf had thought seriously over all Miss Rowton had told him. He felt his duty was clear. He could never claim Tilly with any chance of success until he had made a name for himself, and acquired a fortune. Then, and not till then, could he meet any rivals on equal ground. He already hated in anticipation Richard Rushton, who Miss Rowton had told him was a favoured guest at Yeronga, and had serious intentions towards Tilly. He endeavoured to explain to Tilly that

it was better they should part, at all events for a time, but the impetuous girl would not hear of it. Rolf saw he would have to take the matter into his own hands. Whatever Tilly thought of him he must save her from herself. It was his fault that he had allowed his feelings to be betrayed, and he must repair the damage as best he might.

The Hon. Robert and Richard Rushton arrived when matters were approaching a crisis, and it was well they did so. The presence of her father restrained Tilly, but he soon discovered the girl was not her light-hearted self. He never suspected the cause. He fancied it might be because she was inclined to regard Rushton in a more favourable light. This pleased the Hon. Robert. Rushton he considered a desirable man. Certainly he was older than Tilly, but it was all the better. Then he was wealthy and a gentleman, and moved in the best society in Sydney and Melbourne.

When Rushton and Rolf were compared the master of Yeronga was fain to confess that the latter was the more prepossessing of the two. He liked Rolf, but he never thought of him as being likely to fall in love with Tilly. The notion never entered his head. If it had done he would probably have laughed at it. He had perfect confidence in Rolf, although he could not quite make him out.

Richard Rushton was a man of some standing. He had come out from England about the same time as Rolf, but being possessed of great wealth his position was very different. He was considered a good catch by match-making mammas, and the girl who became Mrs. Rushton would inspire a considerable amount of envy among the rest of her sex. Rushton had a good idea of his own importance, and his manner to his subordinates

was not pleasant. He had a domineering way that made those beneath him sneer at him when an opportunity occurred.

Rushton had earned the undying enmity of Fred Martin in a very simple way. One day when Fred had saddled his horse for him, Rushton complained about the animal's condition, and Fred had remonstrated with him. Rushton lost his temper and called the men about the house a set of lazy louts, and that if he were their master he'd show them what he meant.

Fred Martin fired up, and said that if such a man as Rushton was master at Yeronga he'd never have a decent man about the place to work for him at all. Rushton cursed Fred's d—— impertinence and told him to keep his place when he was about.

"Yes, I'll keep my place, Mr. Richard Rushton," said Fred as the latter rode away, "but if I have a chance of getting even on you, why, bet your bottom dollar I'll be one in, at all events."

Richard Rushton was as much disliked at Yeronga as Rolf Standish was idolised. It did not take Rushton long to discover that Rolf had acquired considerable authority at Yeronga. He liked him none the better for that. He determined to draw Briscoe, and ask him how he came to engage the fellow.

The Hon. Robert told the story of Rolf's engagement, and there was a slightly perceptible sneer on Rushton's lip as he heard the tale. At its conclusion he said :

"I don't think you very wise to entrust a perfect stranger with such unlimited power as this fellow seems to possess. You have admitted him to your household, and yet you know nothing whatever about who or what he is."

"He's a good fellow, Dick," said Briscoe, "and I won't

have him run down. What does it matter who he is so long as he behaves himself. Besides, he's good company on a dull night ; and, d——n it, man, I like the fellow."

"That is all very well," said Rushton. "Have you considered it might be dangerous to leave Miss Briscoe so much in his society?"

"Nonsense!" laughed Briscoe. "You don't know Tilly yet, Dick. Why, she looks upon Rolf as one of our hands, and a good one, too. Danger! None at all. Tilly's as safe with Rolf as she is with me. You don't know the man, Rushton. He's a stickler for duty, and thinks more about honour than a good many men in better positions."

Rolf Standish entered the room as Briscoe spoke, and he could not help catching the last sentences. He turned pale as he heard him express the implicit faith he had in him—"Tilly's as safe with Rolf as she is with me." Was it so? He knew better, and he felt guilty. He must leave Yeronga, and at once, come what might of it.

"Well, Rolf, lad, come and join us at a glass," said Briscoe. "Talk of the—well, you know who, and he's sure to appear."

"I hope I'm a little better company than that individual," said Rolf. "Whisky. Thanks; I don't mind a nip."

Rushton looked hard at Rolf, and wondered where he had seen a face like that before. Where on earth did that likeness come from? He could not make it out at all, and yet there was an expression about Rolf's countenance which caused him considerable uneasiness, although he could not tell why.

Rolf had no love for Richard Rushton. He did not like the look of the man. No doubt he was prejudiced,

but he was also a good judge of character. The two men kept glancing at each other, and at last Richard Rushton said—

“I fancy I have seen you before somewhere, Mr. Smith. Your face is familiar, and yet I cannot for the life of me think where it is we have met.”

“You must be mistaken,” said Rolf. “I am sure you are. We have never met before to my knowledge. We were not likely to meet; our paths in life are so widely apart.”

“A passing likeness to some friend,” said Briscoe. “I often meet men I fancy I know. Where’s Tilly?”

“Here I am, dad! What’s the matter now?” said the girl, as she bounced into the room.

“Come and play for us, Miss Briscoe,” said Rushton.

“I can’t play,” said Tilly. “Mr. Smith will play if you ask him.”

“I prefer to hear you,” said Rushton.

“Then I am afraid you will be disappointed,” she said. “Rolf, give a good hunting song.”

Rolf complied. Rushton could not have sung a song like it to save his life. He knew it, and he hated Rolf for being able to do it, and with so little trouble.

“You cannot sing like that, Mr. Rushton,” said Tilly, tantalisingly. “Don’t you wish you could?”

“No; I don’t think such accomplishments belong to men; they are more fitted for women,” he answered.

“Indeed,” said Rolf. “This is the first time I ever heard men were not intended to use their voices.”

“You should try your hand on the stage,” said Rushton, with a sneer. “I believe it’s an easy way of becoming rich.”

Rolf bit his lip and did not answer. He meant to keep his temper

That night he made up his mind he would leave Yeronga next day. He could play the hypocrite no longer. Mr. Briscoe had implicit trust in him, and how had he betrayed that trust? By stealing his daughter's heart. And yet it was very hard, for he knew Tilly loved him. He must have a final interview with her and then say good-bye. It must be to-night, and he would leave in the morning, giving as an excuse that he wanted to try his luck at the gold diggings, which had broken out about a hundred miles from Yeronga. He saw Miss Rowton, and asked her to speak to Tilly and grant him an interview. He told her why he wished for it, and that he meant to leave Yeronga, and explain to Tilly why he did so. He would not see her for three years. If during that time she remained true to him, he would come and claim her, for he felt he should succeed at the diggings.

With sundry misgivings Miss Rowton consented to the final interview. She thought it would be for the best, and she liked Rolf.

And so it came about that, at night after the inmates of Yeronga had all retired, Tilly came quietly out of her bedroom door, which opened on to the verandah, and in another moment was clasped in Rolf's arms.

"Must you leave me, Rolf?" she said, piteously. "Oh, why do you want to leave me? Let me go with you. I'll do anything for you. I don't care about money. I want you."

"My darling," he said, "it is better we should part. Your father has such confidence in me, and I would not forfeit his good opinion for the world. I will leave you, Tilly, and trust you. If you are free at the end of three years, and I am in a position to claim you, I will come back and do so. You must not think of me, Tilly. I

would not spoil your fair life. There is Richard Rushton devoted to you, and he can give you all the luxuries wealth can buy, while I can give you nothing ; not even a name yet," he said, sadly.

"I hate him," she said. "I will never marry Richard Rushton. I love you, Rolf, and you are cruel to wish to part from me."

"I must go, darling. It is better that I should leave you for a time. Trust me, Tilly, and if ever you want a friend I will tell Fred where I am so that you can send for me. If ever you have need of me, Tilly, I will come to you though it be to the end of the earth." He spoke earnestly and endeavoured to soothe her. She became calmer, and his quiet persuasiveness convinced her. She laid her beautiful head upon his shoulder, and her hair fell about him. Her supple form was clad in a loose morning robe, and she looked enchanting. It was a sore temptation for Rolf to stay and risk all.

"What's that?" he said. "I heard footsteps."

"Come in here," said Tilly, and drew him towards her room.

He stepped inside, not knowing where he was going.

All was quiet again. Perhaps it was only the watch dog after all.

It was a watch dog, but a much more evil and wickedly-designing creature than old "Floss." Richard Rushton, not being able to sleep for thinking where he had seen Rolf before, walked about his room. He thought he heard voices, and, gently unlatching his door, listened. He heard every word of the interview between Rolf and Tilly. He ground his teeth with rage as he heard her imploring his successful rival to remain at Yeronga. She hates me, does she?" he muttered. "Well, I guess I'll make her hate me a bit more when

she's my wife. I'll have her, Mr. Rolf Smith, and make her suffer for this. That doting old fool, Briscoe! He's borrowed enough now from me. A good drought would put a crusher on him." He made a step forward as he spoke. "Hallo! The devil! I didn't think it was as bad as that. Why, d— me if he hasn't gone into her room with her. Perhaps he heard me! No matter. I have you now, my pair of turtle doves. The daughter of the Hon. Robert Briscoe with one of her father's hands in her bedroom at midnight. A nice tale that would make. Quite romantic if it wasn't so infernally ruinous to characters. The Hon. Bob shall hear of this in the morning. I consider it's my duty to inform him what sort of a fellow he has about the place. I fancy your days at Yeronga are numbered, my man, whether you like it or not."

Rolf gave Tilly a long embrace. He had persuaded her to adopt his plan, and he went to his room with a lighter heart. He would be up and away in the morning. Tilly had promised to wait for him. He had heard of fortunes being made in a very short time at the diggings, and why should he not be one of the lucky ones? "I've got health and strength," he said, "and an incentive to work. I've no money, or very little, but I'll make my way. I daresay Briscoe would give me a horse to start me on the journey. If he won't I'll tramp it. Not the first time, I've tramped a hundred miles in Australia, and I reckon I can do it again. I'd tramp a good many hundred miles if I thought I could win Tilly. What a dear girl she is. She'll never marry that fellow Rushton. I don't like that man. There's no good in him. Strange he should have thought he had seen me before. I don't recollect him. I'll explain the matter to Briscoe in the morning and then away for the

diggings, and, by the Lord Harry, I'll dig till I'm blue in the face, but I'll find gold somewhere. Might strike a silver patch instead. Don't care what it is if it turns up trumps."

Richard Rushton could not sleep. What he had heard and seen took away his rest. He meant to be even with Rolf. Tilly's reputation. What did he care for that. She'd be more likely to accept him if she felt her shame as she ought to do. And the Hon. Robert? How would he take it? Rushton thought it would not be at all unlikely that the Hon. Robert would have a fit when he heard the story he could tickle his ears with. "How I hate that fellow," he muttered, as he mused about Rolf. "Where the deuce can I have seen him before?" He started. A thought, and not a very pleasant one, had struck him. "It can't be that. My God, if it should be. He'd kill me if he knew. No, it can't be. I wonder where she is now? Poor devil. She pestered my life out. Always wanting me to marry her. Pretty girl she was, too. D—— it, how like she was to this fellow, Rolf Smith. Wonder where she is now? The usual thing I suppose. Little villa in the suburbs, and late supper parties. Then cards, dice, drink, and damnation. She was good-looking enough to make her fortune in London. Well educated too. Jove, how well she looked in those blessed theatricals at the old place. Played a boy's part, too. That's what fetched me, I believe. I'd a job to win her, too. If she hadn't worried me about getting married we might have been happy now. What the deuce am I thinking about. Tilly must be mine at all events. I love that girl. I'd go mad if I didn't get her. How lovely she is. A perfect picture. Why on earth can't I get rid of that

other face to-night? It haunts me. Wonder if she's dead. Better if she were. What an explosion there'll be in the morning. Seems a pity to crush all Tilly's hopes to the ground, but they must go smash or I've no chance. There's some satisfaction in driving that chap out though. 'Means to go in the morning, does he.' Jove he will go, and in a way he won't like. 'Wants to keep the Hon. Bob's respect for him!' I fancy the hon. gentleman will make Master Rolf understand that he has forfeited all claims to respect. In his daughter's bedroom at midnight. Come, that's very fair. I must harp on that incident. Let me see, how long was he there? Must have been an hour or more. I don't think it was ten minutes, but no matter. Confound it, why can't I sleep? I wish those cursed thoughts of——would not keep cropping up. I must have indigestion. D—— it, I'll take a dose."

He jumped out of bed, struck a match, and producing a small bottle from his dressing-case, let a few drops fall gently into a glass partially filled with water. He drank it off, replaced the bottle, and went off to sleep soon after reaching the bed.

It will be seen that Mr. Richard Rushton was a most desirable man in every respect for the Hon. Robert Briscoe to recommend to his daughter's favourable notice.

CHAPTER VI

A STORMY SCENE.

WHEN Rolf got up the morning after his meeting with Tilly, he was determined to tell Briscoe of his desire to leave for the diggings at once. He felt that to stay meant to waver, and he did not mean to give himself the chance. He went about his business as usual, and as he looked at Testator, his favourite horse, he felt it would be hard to part with him. Perhaps the Hon. Robert would allow him to take the horse as a parting gift. He felt he deserved it, for was he not leaving from a sense of duty, and to save Tilly from herself. Richard Rushton was up early. He determined to see Briscoe before Rolf had the chance. Fortune favoured him. The fickle jade smiles upon the just and the unjust. He met Briscoe on the verandah. It was a difficult task he had set himself, and he hardly knew how to commence. No man, when the pinch comes, likes to tell a deliberate lie to injure another. Rushton never let such trifles stand in his way, but even he felt it was a dastardly act he was about to perform.

"Hope you had a good night of it, Rushton," said Briscoe, as they paced the verandah.

"Cannot say I had particularly. In fact, I may say I had a very bad night. I wish to Heaven I had been asleep, and then I should have had a much easier conscience this morning."

The Hon. Robert looked hard at him. What could he be driving at?

"What do you mean?" he said. "I don't understand you."

‘And I dare not enlighten you,’ said Rushton. ‘I could never have believed it had I not seen it.’

‘Never have believed what, man? Come, out with it. You have discovered something, and the best thing you can do is to tell me what it was.’

Rushton hesitated, and at last said, ‘I am afraid if I do tell you, Mr. Briscoe, you will wish you had never asked me to speak.’

‘Good gracious, man, what is it?’ said Briscoe.

Rushton whispered in his ear.

The Hon. Robert started back as though a heavy blow had struck him. He clenched his fist and set his teeth.

‘It’s a d—nation lie,’ he thundered. ‘I’ll not believe it. How dare you make such a vile accusation? You must be mad, man.’

‘It’s true, Mr. Briscoe. I repeat what I have said. I saw Rolf Smith leave your daughter’s bedroom by the verandah door at midnight or soon after last night.’

Briscoe groaned. ‘I’ll not believe it,’ he said. ‘My Tilly’s the purest girl on earth, and I have treated Rolf almost as a son. There must be some mistake. I’ll tackle Rolf at once with it.’

‘Do nothing hastily, Mr. Briscoe. I may have been mistaken. We can soon find out. I heard Rolf Smith say that he was going to leave you to-day and start for the diggings. He said that as he came out of her bedroom. She said she would be true to him and wait until he came to fetch her.’

‘Tilly said that? My God this is terrible,’ said Briscoe. ‘I’ll never believe it. She’s as pure as an angel whatever Rolf may be.’

‘They are lovers, nevertheless,’ said Rushton, ‘and one step leads to another. You don’t know what goes

on when you are away from home. My own opinion is the fellow's a scoundrel and forced his way into the room, and that Tilly, to get rid of him, promised anything he asked."

"I'll horsewhip the villain. I'll shoot him. I can't believe it. He's such an honest, manly fellow," said Briscoe.

"Here he is. No doubt he's honest; he looks it. I've no doubt he's come to tell you he's going to leave you. Wait and see," said Rushton, with a cunning smile.

Rolf came up and saluted them. "Good morning, Mr. Briscoe; can I have a word with you," he said.

"Certainly," said Briscoe, with difficulty restraining himself.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Briscoe, for what I am about to do, but I think it is for the best," began Rolf. "I have been very happy here—too happy in fact. When you met me by chance in Sydney and brought me here I swore I'd do my duty, and I have striven to do so. I must leave you, Mr. Briscoe. I am sorry to go, but it is for the best."

"Why do you want to go?" said Briscoe in a low voice. His worst fears were being confirmed.

"I want to try my luck at the diggings," said Rolf. "I may have a chance of striking a patch, and I want to get money. I have a great desire to gain an independence. I hope you will meet with someone to suit you better than I have done, Mr. Briscoe. You have been very kind to me, and I hope some day I shall be able to return it."

"Rolf Smith, or whatever your name is," said Briscoe in a towering rage, "you're a scoundrel."

Rolf turned livid. He saw the sneering face of Rush-

ton, and he felt that man was the cause of this attack.

"No man ever said words like those to me before," said Rolf, "and no man ever shall without giving me satisfaction." It was with difficulty he controlled himself, the insult was so direct and unexpected. "I am no scoundrel, Robert Briscoe, and I defy any man to prove it."

"You're a thorough-paced blackguard, sir," said Briscoe, white with rage. "D—n you man, you've ruined my life and stained my honour, and I'll have it out with you if I am an older man."

He struck a furious blow at Rolf in his mad passion, and hit him on his not-yet strong arm, which Rolf put up to save himself. The pain was intense, but not so great as the pain at his heart.

He raised his right arm as though to return the blow and then let it drop to his side.

"I cannot strike her father," he thought.

"You're a coward as well as a liar, I see," said Briscoe "but you don't know the man you've got to deal with."

"What the meaning of these insults are I know not," said Rolf. "You have been, as I said before, kind to me. I am repaying your kindness at great cost to myself, if you only knew it. You will be sorry for those hasty words some day, and will apologise; I have never injured you or yours by word or deed."

"It's a lie," said Briscoe again, "a barefaced, deliberate lie. Where were you at midnight last night?"

Rolf started back, and a pained scared look shot across his face. "How much did Briscoe know?" he wondered.

"Ah, that shot told," said the furious man.

"Where were you last night, you villain," said Briscoe.

"I did nothing last night that I am ashamed of, or that anyone need be ashamed of," said Rolf. "I can account for all I did last night, Mr. Briscoe, but not in the presence of strangers. I will tell you what I did last night when we are alone."

"He confesses his guilt; you hear him, Rushton. The smiling hypocrite. Man, how can you stand there and look me in the face?" panted Briscoe.

"I repeat that I will explain to you everything you want to know if you will listen to me alone," said Rolf.

"There was a witness to the scene," said Briscoe, with a hoarse laugh. "You are found out, Mr. Smith. You were seen coming out of my daughter's bedroom at midnight last night. Now, you devil, what have you got to say for yourself."

Rolf saw at a glance what a serious fix he was in. And yet he thought more of Tilly than himself. She must be cleared at any cost. He hesitated before he answered.

"Who saw me?" he said.

"I did," said Rushton.

Rolf turned round on him with such a menacing look that Rushton drew back a step or two.

"I'll not hurt you, you pitiful spy," said Rolf, contemptuously.

Rushton raised his clenched fist.

"Drop that," said Rolf. "You are a younger man and are nothing to me. Drop it, or I'll fell you where you stand."

Rushton saw he meant what he said and dropped his fist. He was an errant coward at heart.

"He saw you go into my daughter's bedroom, and stay an hour," said Briscoe.

"It's a lie," said Rolf. "A black-hearted lie, and comes from a foul-hearted sneak."

"Don't call other people names," said Briscoe. "Were you in my daughter's room last night?"

"Let me explain," said Rolf.

"Yes or no," thundered Briscoe.

"I can explain——" said Rolf.

"Tell the truth for once in your life, man. There can be no explanation," said Briscoe.

"I was there," said Rolf, "but I did not remain five minutes, and I can solemnly swear I never thought of its being Miss Briscoe's room until this moment."

"More lies. A tissue of lies," said Briscoe. "Rushton saw you go in and come out, and he says you were there an hour."

"And I say he lies," said Rolf.

"It is perfectly true," said Rushton.

"It is not true," said a voice behind them, and Briscoe turning round saw his daughter.

"Go in the house, Miss," said Briscoe. "Go inside. If there is any shame left in you leave me to settle this matter with your degraded lover."

"And if he is my lover what of that?" said Tilly, defiantly.

"My God! hear her," said Briscoe. "She glories in her shame."

"There is no shame in loving an honest man, father, and I do love Rolf. I'm not ashamed of him. He is no scoundrel. He's a true-hearted, noble fellow," said Tilly.

"He was in your room for an hour last night, Miss. Don't try and shield him. Mr. Rushton saw him go in and saw him come out. There can be no mistake about it," said Briscoe.

Tilly turned on Rushton such a withering glance of scorn that he could not face it.

"Let him tell that lie now, if he dare," said Tilly.

"It is perfectly true, Miss Briscoe, and you know it," he said.

Rolf took a step towards him, when Tilly said "Stop."

"Father, you have never refused to hear me or believe me before. The construction you put upon what Mr. Rushton tells you is false. I did meet Rolf last night," she said, with a loving glance at him that made his pulses tingle, and Rushton's hand clench with rage. "I met him on the verandah. It was for a last interview. Rolf told me it was not honourable for him to remain here and steal your daughter. He said he should leave the next day. I begged him to stay. I told him I loved him, and urged him with all the persuasiveness I could command to remain. He was firm and would not. As we were talking, Rolf thought he heard footsteps. I have no doubt he did. There was a spy about"—this with another glance at Rushton. "I drew him into my room. The door was never closed, and he was not there five minutes. That is the whole truth, father," she said, scornfully.

The Hon. Robert looked at his daughter, and then he looked at Rolf. Rushton saw he felt inclined to yield and said—

"Of course Miss Briscoe is anxious to shield her lover, and keep her own good name unstained. Unfortunately I have good eyes, and a reliable watch, and I know what took place," said Rushton.

"Go inside," said Briscoe to his daughter.

"I will not stir, father. You are cruel. It is unlike you. How can you think ill of me?" she said.

"She speaks the truth, I swear it," said Rolf. "May Heaven forgive your foul and slanderous lies," he said, turning to Rushton. "I will settle with you some day,"

he went on. "The time will come when you and I shall meet again. You have tried to defame the name of the woman I love more than anything on earth. Yes, I am not ashamed to say it, Mr. Briscoe. I love your daughter, and if I can win her I will. I forgive your hasty words. They were not your own. They were prompted by that vile wretch cowering there," and he pointed at Rushton. "I will leave you, Robert Briscoe, and the remorse you will feel for slandering an innocent man will some day cause you bitter pain. I leave Tilly in your charge. She is pure and sinless as when her mother gave her birth. I would cut off my two hands rather than injure a hair of her head. I would die to save her a moment's pain. Take care of the treasure you possess, Robert Briscoe. There is a snake in the grass, and beware of it in time. Farewell, Tilly. We shall soon meet again."

Tilly sprang into his arms, and he clasped her to his heart and imprinted a kiss on her fair forehead. He then put her gently away from him.

Turning to Rushton he said :

"I have a heavy account to settle with you, Richard Rushton. You may be sure I will pay you back with interest."

How heavy that account was Rolf little knew. Had he known then what he knew in after years he would have struck Richard Rushton dead at his feet.

He turned and went slowly off the verandah. Tilly rushed into the house and to her room, and locked the door.

Briscoe turned on Rushton and said, "Are you certain about what you say, Rushton? I never knew Tilly tell a lie. If her story is correct the affair is bad enough, but not half as bad as you make it. Thank Heaven, it's stopped in time. She's so young and innocent. Rolf,

no doubt, attracted her attention. It's a mere passing fancy. She'll soon get over that. But if there should be anything else—no, I'll not believe it, Rushton, she's as pure as snow."

"I quite believe that, Mr. Briscoe," said Rushton. "The man's to blame, not Miss Briscoe. You know I love her, and this has been a sore blow to me. I love her still, and if I can win her I shall be a proud and happy man. I think with you this is a mere romantic girl's passion for a good-looking fellow much beneath her in station."

"We shall see," says Briscoe. "It's a sad blow to me. I'd such implicit faith in Rolf. D— it, I like him now. What cursed bad luck ever put him in my path, I wonder?"

"Let him go, and think no more about it," said Rushton. "He's like the rest of the fellows of his class who come out here. He's a black sheep, and no good."

The Hon. Robert Briscoe passed a wretched day. He believed from the bottom of his heart what his daughter had told him, and yet he had no reason to doubt Rushton's word. "He must have been mistaken," he said; "and Rolf. Why on earth didn't I see it before? A fine, handsome fellow like that. Just the man to capture a girl like Tilly. Heigho! what a world this is. I was a bit rough on him. Dash it all, I'll see him before he goes and explain matters. Going to the diggings, is he? Well, I wish him luck, but he can't have Tilly. That's nonsense. If he's no better luck than I've had lately at mining he'll soon be up a tree. Hang it all, I was never so short of cash before. Now I've mortgaged Yeronga to Rushton, and he's a pretty tight hand from all I can learn. I must make a recovery somehow. Those 'Golden Crowns' ought to

go up soon ; if they do I'm made, if they don't, well, the prospect is not very pleasant. Rushton's in love with Tilly, that's one thing, and of course he'll give time. She shan't marry him unless she likes, but I'll dangle the bait before his eyes a bit. There can be no harm in it till I pull through."

The Hon. Bob, like many another good man, had speculated more than he ought to have done, and with the result that a great hole had been made in his fortune. He was an extravagant man in many things, and Yeronga cost him a good deal more than it ought to do. Richard Rushton had lent him large sums of money at various times "merely as a friend," he said, but the Hon. Robert had found he required his interest with the punctuality of a Jew. "Merely a matter of business, you know," Rushton said as he asked for the amount when due. But Rushton had to go without the interest of late, and so the amount was accumulating, and affairs were becoming complicated. The Hon. Robert had, however, a happy-go-lucky disposition, and kept laying the flattering unction to his soul that it would all come right in the end.

Tilly remained in her room all day and resolutely refused to see anyone. This hurt the Hon. Robert's fond heart. He determined to see her, and went to the door himself. She admitted him, and when he came out after about an hour's talk he felt more himself.

Mrs. Rowton rated him soundly, and explained the whole matter, and eulogised Rolf's conduct in desiring to leave Tilly free.

When she had done the Hon. Robert thought he had made rather an "ass of himself," as he put it, and was more than ever determined to see Rolf and recall the bitter words he had said in the heat of his anger.

CHAPTER VII.

TAKE HIM, ROLF

BITTER indeed was the blow Robert Briscoe had dealt Rolf. Little did he know the man he had insulted. Rushton's slanderous lies Rolf could afford to despise, but it was hard to have to bear such language from a man he respected, and the father of the girl he loved so dearly. Rolf meant to go at once—but how?

That was now the all important question. He had no horse to ride, and he did not know where to purchase one with the small amount of money he possessed. As he strolled towards the stables with a dejected air he met Fred Martin, who at once saw there was something wrong with his mate.

"What ails ye, man?" he said. "You look regular down in the mouth."

"I'm going to leave Yeronga, Fred, and I don't know how to get away. I've no horse, and I've very little money to buy one with," said Rolf.

Fred gazed at him in astonishment. "Going to leave Yeronga," he said. "Why man, you're mad, clean gone. That fall off the Queen must have upset you. Drat it all, what the deuce has come over you? Some of you chaps are never satisfied. Don't you know when ye've got a decent billet."

"It's not that, Fred. I've nothing to complain of about the billet. The boss is a real good sort. The fact is, we've had a falling out. You need not say anything about it, Fred. I know I can trust you. I'm off to the diggings at Melrose Creek to try my luck, and I want a horse that will carry me there," said Rolf.

"Going to the diggings, eh? Now look here, don't you be a fool," said honest Fred. "Take my tip and stop here; you'll be wanted afore long or I'm mistaken. That other cove's no good. You're worth a dozen of him, Rolf. I know what's up. Don't imagine I've got no eyes. You're hard hit, lad. Them bright eyes of Miss Tilly's is the cause of all this."

Rolf put up his hand deprecatingly.

"It's no use denying it," went on Fred. "She'd turn any man's head, and it's my belief she gone on you. Here you are going to up sticks and leave that blessed fellar that ain't fit to black yer boots in command of the squadron. It's madness, man."

"I cannot help it," said Rolf; "it's for her sake I'm going. You see it wouldn't do, Fred. She's far above me. I'm only her father's station hand. No; I must go, and I want you to help me."

"I'll help ye right enough if yer determined," said Fred. "I'd stop though if I were you. Want a horse, do you? Quarrelled with the boss, too. That's awkward. He'd have either given yer one or lent it as long as you wanted. He's not a bad sort, isn't the Honourable."

"There's no chance of that now," said Rolf. "He called me bitter names, and I couldn't ask a favour of him. I'd rather do the hundred odd miles on foot."

"It's a roughish country, lad, and yer might get bushed," said Fred. "It's a bad road to Melrose Creek for the man that hasn't travelled it afore. Blest if I don't think I'll have a cut in myself and go with you, only I'm getting a bit past it now."

"I wish you'd come," said Rolf. "But it would not be fair to drag you away from here."

"Fair or not, it wouldn't take much to make me go.

Hallo, here's the boss himself. Now what the deuce can he be after?"

Rolf went into the stable to be out of the way, thinking the Hon. Robert was coming to tell Fred of the change and ask him to take charge.

Robert Briscoe was not the man to hesitate when he had decided upon a certain course of action. He had come to the conclusion that Rushton had exaggerated the whole affair, and that Rolf was not so much to blame. He attributed Rushton's malice to hatred of his rival, and in this surmise he was correct.

"Where's Rolf," he said.

Fred never said a word, but jerked his thumb in the direction of the stable.

"Can't you speak, man?" said Briscoe, irritably.

"I like Rolf," said Fred, simply, "and you'd no cause to go and insult the best man about the place."

Briscoe laughed uneasily. "Where is he? Never mind all that bosh," he said.

"In the stable," grunted Fred. He was savage because Rolf was about to go.

Briscoe went into the stable. He walked right up to Rolf and held out his hand.

"Rolf," he said, "I insulted you. I'm sorry for what I said. I find you are not so much to blame after all, and I apologise."

A bright smile passed over Rolf's face. He took Briscoe's hand and grasped it heartily.

"I accept your apology," he said, "I knew you could never so misjudge me. You spoke in the heat of passion. Under the circumstances I can understand it. You believe now what Miss Briscoe said was true."

"I do," said Briscoe. "She's a truthful girl. I never found her out in a lie. Miss Rowton also explained

matters. You're a good fellow, Rolf, and I'm real sorry I spoke. But you're right to go, lad. It shows your honour. Can I help you? I'll give you a start if I can."

Rolf considered. It was quite evident, although the Hon. Robert had apologised, that he could not regard his suit favourably. Nor was it to be wondered at.

"You can help me very much in one way," he said.

"What is that?" said Briscoe.

"If I make a position for myself and Miss Briscoe is free, will you allow me to win her if I can?"

"Yes, Rolf. If you are successful and Tilly is free I will not put obstacles in your way. But, mind, you must not correspond with her until I give you permission," he said.

"I will not," said Rolf, "and I thank you for your promise."

"How are you going to get to Melrose Creek?" said Briscoe. "It's an awkward country to ride through, but I dare say you'll find your way."

"I must buy a horse," said Rolf. "I was about to ask you if you'll sell me one?"

"Sell you one, lad? I'll lend you one until you get tired of him," said Briscoe. "Which should you like?"

Rolf was looking with wistful eyes at Testator, but he hardly liked to ask for the loan of such a valuable animal. Briscoe followed his glance, and said with a smile:

"Would Testator suit you, Rolf?"

"He's too good for my work," said Rolf, "but he's a grand horse, and we understand each other. I must say I should like him very much."

"Take him, Rolf," said Briscoe. "He's yours. I owe some anends for what I said to you. Keep Testator as a token that all unpleasant scenes are forgotten."

"A thousand thanks," said Rolf. "You are too generous. I shall leave now with a light heart, and shall work hard. I feel I shall have luck, and I will return and claim Miss Briscoe."

"I wish you well with all my heart, Rolf. Don't be too sanguine. Hundreds fail at the game where one succeeds."

"I might happen to be the one," said Rolf.

"I hope so," said Briscoe.

The two men shook hands, and Rolf said :

"I will not see Miss Briscoe before I leave. Do me a last kindness, and explain the compact we have made."

"I will. You may depend upon me for that," said Briscoe, as he left the stable.

"Well, have yer made it up?" said Fred.

"Yes, it's all right," said Rolf. "He's given me Testator, Fred. Was it not kind of him?"

"No more than he ought to have done for a man like you," said Fred. "He'll never get a chap like you again for a blue moon."

"I don't know how long a blue moon lasts, Fred, but you'll soon find another pal when I'm gone," said Rolf.

"No, I shan't. I don't take to all sorts. You're the right grit, and I wish yer luck. When do yer start?"

"I'm off in an hour or two. I must pack up a few catables and take some water with me," said Rolf.

"There's plenty of creeks if you don't miss 'em," said Fred. "You might take summat to drink with ye in case of necessity."

Rolf was soon ready for a start, and as he mounted Testator he felt more at ease than he had done for some time. He was going to make a fresh start, and he had the Hon. Robert's promise that if he made his way he could try and obtain his daughter's hand. He felt

he could trust Tilly, and he knew she would be true to him. He bade good-bye to Fred, and rode slowly out of the yard. He had received instructions as to how he was to proceed, and felt sure of the road. He turned in the saddle and saw Tilly on the verandah. She waved her handkerchief, and he lifted his hat in reply. It was the parting salute. He saw Richard Rushton come up to her side, and he turned sharply away, and pressing Testator's sides started off at a hand-gallop.

How the gallant horse bounded under him over the springy turf. On they went. The country became rougher. Rocks and huge boulders raised themselves up in all directions. There was no made road, merely a track, and at times this was almost indistinguishable.

Rolf rode on, carefully picking his way, and at last when he had made about forty miles, as he thought, night came on, and he camped. It was a splendid scene. The pale light of the moon shed a peculiarly weird lustre all around. The huge gaunt trees cast fantastic shadows on the ground. He fixed his camp near a small creek, and both horse and man eagerly refreshed themselves at it. He unsaddled Testator and tethered him to a tree close by, giving him plenty of rope, so that he could crop the herbage. Then he fixed his saddle against the foot of a high tree, placed the saddle-cloth on it for a pillow, and lay down to rest. It was balmy and warm, and Rolf was used to exposure. He was not long before he fell asleep. With the rising sun he awoke, and after a brief repast, saddled up Testator and proceeded on his way. The country became wilder and more desolate. An occasional laughing jackass gave forth his peculiar mocking sound. Parrots of many colours fluttered about, their bright plumage flashing in the sunlight. Here and there wallabys and kangaroos

could be seen, and once a snake glided across his path. At last he reached the summit of a hill. What a magnificent panorama lay mapped out before him. He reined in the horse and admired it. As far as he could see stretched wave after wave of undulating forest land, deep gullies and ravines. Such scenery as can only be seen amidst the mountains of the west. The rush of water could be heard, and on turning a shade to the right he saw a beautiful cascade, the water foaming and dashing down on to a rocky bed beneath. But he felt there was no time for delay. If he could get within twenty miles of his destination by nightfall he felt it would be all right, so he pressed onwards. When he reached a level piece of ground he sent Testator at it, and the horse moved along like a machine. He jumped him over an occasional fallen tree, and the horse bounded over it like an antelope. Testator was a practised jumper, and could move rapidly, having good sound blood in his veins. Nightfall again, and the bush had become denser and denser. Rolf feared he had strayed somewhat out of the right path, but he determined to camp for the night and be more careful in the morning. There was no creek near, nor could he see any signs of water. Both man and horse had had a good drink a couple of hours back, and the dewy grass would be moist for Testator's feed. He tethered his horse and lay down to sleep once more thoroughly tired out. It was broad daylight when he roused himself. The first thing he noticed was the rope had come untied, and Testator was gone. This did not trouble him much, as he fancied the horse would not stray far away from him. He ate a frugal meal and then went to look for the horse. After an hour's search he became uneasy. He followed the track until he lost it, and could not make out which way he had gone.

Then he tried to retrace his steps, and missed his way. An awful sense of loneliness oppressed him. Hour after hour he wandered aimlessly about. He could not make the place he had camped at the night before, and he had left what little food and water he had with him there. Night came on, and Rolf was parched and hungry. By the light of the moon he wandered on until exhausted. He had to sink down and rest.

And as he lay there in that vast forest stillness, with myriads of stars twinkling in the heavens above, the awful truth at last flashed upon him. He was lost in the bush.

The terrible sense of loneliness struck a chill to Rolf's heart. As he lay there he thought of all his past life. He had lived an honourable career, and he was not afraid to die. But the thought of dying of hunger and thirst maddened him. He must try again and find the camping-place. He staggered to his feet, and for two hours wandered on. At last he stumbled and fell, and he was so exhausted sleep came over him and he forgot his troubles. Morning, and with it the awakening to a sense of his position. He sat up and commenced to think. Testator. Where had he got to. If the horse managed to strike any human dwelling-place a search party would no doubt be sent out. The rope on the horse would denote that he had strayed from a camping-place. But how many days might that be? Good God! Days. He would be dead by then. Death from thirst. He shuddered. For once in his life Rolf Standish felt almost afraid. He knelt down and prayed to his God to save him. Then he rose to his feet and once more commenced his search. For four hours he wandered about, and then at last the country seemed familiar. It was. He had gone round in a circle and reached the place

he started from. Rolf sat down, and a dull sense of hopelessness came over him. Night again. Oh, this terrible thirst. How the heat had parched his tongue. His lips cracked ; no spittle to moisten his tongue. He would have given up all hopes of the future for one cupful of dirty water. His eyes glared. He cut a piece of leather from his boot and chewed it, and the mere fact of having something in his mouth relieved the strain. He felt around as the night wore on. Yes, his hat was damp with the dew. He managed to moisten his lips with it, and that gave him such extreme relief that he slept.

Another day passed. No food. No water. No hope. He lay down in despair to die. He was wide awake and yet he dreamt strange dreams. The sound of rushing, splashing water could be heard he fancied, and in his imagination he was seated at the well-spread table at Yeronga with Tilly by his side. He laughed. Yes he could actually laugh. "More wine. Yes, of course, I'll have more wine. No, give me water. Only a drop," and he stretched out his hand with a groan. "Ha, ha, ha. This is glorious. How cool it is. Gad, I was dry and no mistake."

He clutched at his throat. He tore open his shirt. Then he stood straight up and gazed around with staring eye-balls. He realised his position for one awful moment, and with a cry of terror sank insensible to the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

JUST IN TIME.

THE township of Melrose Creek was bathed in silvery moonlight. Not a sound could be heard except the occasional bark of a dog or the crowing of a rooster fancying daydawn was at hand. The miners were all asleep after a hard day's work. Many were in tents or small huts rapidly put up. In the main street were several stores and a couple of public houses, a church, and a small hall, and sundry wooden dwellings. Melrose Creek had sprung rapidly into life with that mushroom-like rapidity for which mining towns are famous. Both gold and silver had been found in large quantities, and already several men were on the high road to fortune. There had been a big rush to Melrose Creek when Nat Smiley made the first discovery of gold and silver. He had been fossicking about in the vicinity for some months, and had at last been rewarded by striking a rich patch. The news soon spread, but Nat had secured the claim he wanted, and it was turning out the richest on the field, and already he was called the "lucky digger." There was more silver than gold in Smiley's claim—he had two—and the silver one promised to be a huge mine of wealth.

Melrose Creek is situated in a splendid hollow, bounded on either side by mountains and almost cut off from civilisation. The Government had made a road to the place from the nearest township, but it was like most Government work, not particularly good. About 1500 people had settled down at the Creek, and a brisk busi-

ness was done at the various stores. The public houses, as usual, drove a roaring trade, for the miners made their money rapidly and spent it freely.

Nat Smiley's cottage was at the far end of the main street, and he lived there alone. He had about thirty men employed on his claims, and yet he could not fancy any of them well enough to make a companion of and take into his home. Smiley was peculiar. He was about five and thirty, and a robust, hearty man, quite capable of taking care of himself. He was much respected for his straightforward ways and his liberality. Any case of distress coming under his notice, his hand was always in his pocket ready to render assistance. He was a well educated man, and why he had come out to the colonies no one knew or cared. He was decidedly head man at Melrose Creek, and he had assumed the position naturally.

Melrose Creek was slumbering, or rather her inhabitants were. Smiley was an early riser and a light sleeper. It was almost four in the morning, and he was wide awake. Suddenly his practised ears caught the sound of a horse's hoofs, and it appeared as though the animal was galloping over the turf near the approach to the township. Smiley listened intently, and at last got out of bed and drawing up the blind looked out. He could not see anything, so he opened the door after slipping on his clothes.

"What a beautiful morning," he said to himself. "Wonder who's abroad at this hour? Some poor beggar been bushed perhaps, and luckily struck the Creek. Hullo! what's this?"

The reason for this remark was not far to seek. Clattering up the street came a magnificent horse with a long rope trailing after him, fastened round his neck.

Nat watched it, and at once came to the conclusion the horse had broken away during the night and left his rider in the bush. He watched the horse until it came to a standstill nearly opposite his door. Then he gently slipped out of the gate and gradually got up to the end of the rope. He coaxed the horse, and it seemed inclined to recognise him. Horses have a curious instinct, and intuitively know when a man likes them. So Nat patted the animal on the neck, and gently led it into his enclosure. The horse saw a bucket on the ground, and at once made a dart for it.

"Thirsty, eh! That looks bad," muttered Nat. "You must have been a day or two without water."

He went to the well and hauled up half a bucketful, and the horse drank it eagerly.

"You're a beauty," said Nat. "Cost no end of a trifle, I'll bet."

He was right. It was poor Rolf Standish's horse Testator that had luckily found his way to Melrose Creek.

"Where's your master, old fellow?" said Nat.

Testator looked at him, and shoved his nose in Smiley's hand. He glanced around, and seemed as though he could explain it all.

"I see," said Smiley. "You've got away in the night, my boy, and left the boss to die in the bush, I suppose. It must have been a couple of days since you slipped him. I must have some of the lads out, and we'll organise a search party. We'll find your master, never fear. If he's alive, we'll get at him somehow. It's a clever chap can hide from me for twenty miles around here. I guess I haven't fossicked about here for a couple of years for nothing. I often wonder how the deuce I've lived through it. Melrose Creek, and Nat

Smiley the oldest inhabitant. Funny, isn't it." He laughed to himself as he thought of it.

He tethered Testator, and gave him a feed, and then marched up the street and knocked up three of his men.

"Now, lads, we must scour the country. There's a man bushed somewhere, and we must find him. Recollect what an awful thing death from thirst is, lads. I'll give a tenner to the man that strikes his track first."

"We'll find him, boss," said the men. "If he's above ground we'll have him afore sunset."

They got horses, and the four of them were soon off.

The tracks of Testator's hoofs were visible, and in the heavy dew they could discern the trail of the rope, which looked almost like a snake gliding along the grass. On they went, slowly but surely. Did they but know it, they were having a race with grim death, and it was a toss up which would win. Nat Smiley felt anxious. He had been nigh to death himself once in the bush, and he knew its fearful agony.

The men seldom spake; their mission was too solemn. They might find a human being dead or in mortal agony, and past help. On they went. Brave hearts that would have given a year of their lives to find a lost man alive and rescue him.

When Rolf Standish came to himself it was early morning. He had been insensible several hours, and it was a merciful dispensation that such had been the case. But as consciousness returned he realised once more the awful nature of his position.

To die in a wilderness! What had he done that this awful calamity should come upon him?

He tried to stand, but could not. He felt numbed

and almost without hope. And yet there was a faint, a very faint chance for him. Testator might have found his way back to Yeronga, and they would come in search of him.

Oh! this awful thirst. Water! Water! Water! He would have sold his hope of salvation for one cupful of water. He could not move. He must die like a dog. Above him shone the bright blue sky. The birds twittered and fluttered around. They were safe. They knew where to find water, but he—Great God! he must die of thirst.

The sun came out and poured down its scorching rays upon him. His hat had fallen off, and he heeded it not. His head burned like fire, and his mouth had swollen and blistered. He was becoming delirious. More dreams of far-off lands. He was at home, and Tilly by his side. He once more saw the old place as it had been in the days of his youth, before that terrible crash came. He saw his dear old father in the prime of life, happy, honoured, and respected, and his sister's loving voice murmured words of comfort in his ear. He wandered through shady valleys with Tilly by his side, and he dabbled in the brooklet that ran its way through masses of forget-me-nots, violets, and mayflowers. All was peace. He was with her, contented and forgetful of the world.

"Tally ho! Tally ho! Tally ho! They're gone away." He heard the familiar cry ring in his ear, and the horn of the huntsman sound on the still scene. He saw the pink coats dash alongside the wood, and the fox break away with the pack making music as they picked up the scent in the wood. Away, away, away. That was a great leap. Safe over. In the first flight with 'em now. There they go, the beauties. Heads down, tails

out, and running like the wind. He's in the same field with them. Away they go. Tilly and he are the only two up. The rest are toiling in the rear. What a run ; an hour without a check. Run to earth at last. Dig Reynard out. The little fox-terrier with the best Belvoir blood in her veins is up and ready to dart at the hole. He's got the brush, and hands it to Tilly. Water, water, water !

A flash of memory. Back again once more to his awful position. Not in the hunting-field with the Meynell, the Quorn or the Rufford, but dying by inches in the Australian bush far from human aid or help.

Mercy ! Great God have mercy ! Kill him outright. Stop this fearful gnawing pain.

Night is coming on—his last night on earth. Visions flash before his eyes. Sweet music sounds in his ears. He sees angel forms flitting amidst the ghost-like branches of the gum-trees. He is on the brink of the grave. A peep into futurity has been vouchsafed Rolf Standish. He sees his father with outstretched arms waiting to welcome him on the shining shore. A great calm comes over him. Rolf Standish is a brave man, but he shudders as the cold grip of death lays hold upon him.

Ah ! what's that ?

With a great effort he tries to wrench himself away. He feels that hand again upon his shoulder, and a grim voice whispers in his ear : "Mine ! Mine ! Mine !"

Not yet. There is a merciful God above. He has tried Rolf Standish, and found him a true man.

Not yet ! There are willing hearts searching the dense bush, and they are on the track. Not yet ! The gorged carrion birds shall not feast upon the prey they have watched so long.

A human voice. Heavens ! can it be true ?

Rolf's fast closing eyes gaze upward, and he sees the face of Nat. Smiley bending over him with a wistful look in his eyes.

A smile of contentment passes over Rolf's face as he falls back—dead.

"He's gone," said Smiley. "Poor chap. A fine young fellow too."

"Not dead yet, boss," said one of the men. "It's a near go though. Here, hold up his head." Nourishment was forced between Rolf's set teeth. If ever a man was snatched from the very jaws of death he was.

For two hours they tried to revive him. Then when he came round they sat with him all through the night under the big tree and tended him as carefully as a mother would her child. The sons of the bush were true hearted men.

Morning—and with it Rolf was found to be in a high state of fever, combined with sunstroke.

How they got him to Melrose Creek they hardly knew. He could not sit on a horse, so they spread a blanket and fastened it between two quiet horses and placed him on it, and then led them gently along.

At times they improvised a litter, and carried him.

After a two days' tramp they reached Melrose Creek.

All the township turned out, and, despite the warning hand Nat held up, cheer after cheer rent the air.

It did not rouse Rolf Standish. He lay like one in a trance.

They carried him carefully into Smiley's house, and he was put into Nat's own bed.

For weeks he hovered between life and death, and that faithful man tended him like a mother.

In his ravings Nat gathered a good deal of Rolf's past

life, and what he could not understand he guessed at. His honest heart went out to the sufferer, and he vowed if he recovered he should work a part of his claim and snare the profits. Gradually Rolf got better. Slowly he regained strength. At last he could sit up and talk. He questioned Nat and heard all.

How grateful he felt. He looked at Smiley with tears in his eyes, and thanked him a thousand times.

"And you've watched me for weeks," said Rolf; "what did you do that for?"

"Because you're a fellow creature, and a good fellow I'll be bound," said Nat. "You just get well, my hearty, and I'll show you what Nat Smiley will do for you."

"But where am I?" said Rolf.

"At Melrose Creek," said Nat Smiley.

"That's where I was bound for when the horse left me and I got bushed. It's all through the horse I lost my way," said Rolf.

"And it's all through that horse you were found, lad," said Nat.

"How's that?" asked Rolf.

"Look," said Smiley, as he opened the door.

"Why that's Testator, my horse," said Rolf. "How did he get here?"

"Found his way and saved your life," said Nat. "I saw him come up the street, and guessed what had happened and set out to look for you. We were only just in time. You had a narrow squeak, mate."

"And you saved me," said Rolf. "How can I ever repay you?"

"By getting well and working my claim with me," said Nat.

"I'll work for you with a will when I'm strong," said Rolf.

"That you shall, mate, and for yourself, too. I like you, Rolf, for that's your name I found out in your rambling talk, and I heard a bit of your history. Never mind, it's all safe with me," he said, as Rolf looked hard at him.

"I've had a rough time of it," said Rolf. "I want to make some cash if I can."

"And I know why," said Nat. "Never fear, mate. You shall win that girl if Nat Smiley can help you."

"Did I tell all about that?" said Rolf.

"You did, and what you said is sacred. No one heard you but myself," he said.

"You're too good," said Rolf. "Heaven will reward you."

"I'm rewarded already in seeing you recover," said Nat.

"What is your name? I forget what you said," asked Rolf.

"Nat Smiley, my lad. Some people call me the 'lucky digger.'"

CHAPTER IX.

THE LUCKY DIGGER.

SIX months passed, and Rolf Standish and Nat Smiley had become as attached to each other as two brothers. They were inseparable, and it seemed that at last the "lucky digger" had found a man after his own heart, one of whom he could make a bosom friend.

Like Nat, the people of Melrose Creek could hardly make Rolf out, but they cared very little who he was when they discovered what he was. Rolf speedily became popular, and as his strength returned he set to work at Nat Smiley's silver claim.

"Share and share alike, mate, in this silver claim," said Nat to him after a conversation. "It it goes against your grain I'll keep the other claim myself, and you shan't have a cent. in it. But you must go halves in the silver claim. I'm dead on having my way and making you a rich man. There's more than I want. I'm an old bachelor, you a young spark with a girl and a future before you. Now just listen to me. In a year's time we'll float this mine. Have you any idea what we'll get for it, Rolf?"

"What you'll get for it, Nat," said Rolf laughing. "I've told you before I cannot accept such a generous offer as you propose to make."

"Stow that. I've always had my own way when I've had money enough, and I mean to have it now," said Nat.

"Do you know what you're giving me?" said Rolf. "Why, that mine's worth thousands."

"I'm giving you what you require—cash. The Hon. Robert Briscoe won't refuse some of that if all I hear's correct," said Nat.

"What have you heard?" said Rolf. "Anything from Yeronga station?"

"Just you keep cool, mate. Why, bless my soul, the very mention of Briscoe sends you flying off in all directions like a Catherine wheel. I'll tell you what it is, Rolf, the Hon. Robert Briscoe is a poorer man at this minute than you are. Wait a bit," went on Nat, as Rolf was about to speak, "I know pretty well all that goes

on in the mining world, and I can tell you the Hon. Bob's come a cropper, although not many people know it. He's bought heavily in 'Golden Crowns,' and they're no chop. There's some chap named Rushton at the bottom of that blessed spec——"

Rolf fairly bounded out of his chair as he said, excitedly :

"You don't mean to tell me Rushton has sold all those shares to Briscoe!"

"Man alive, what's up with you?" said Nat. "If you must know, I think you've about hit the mark. This Rushton is a rich man, but he don't bear a good name on 'Change. He's what I call 'a bit off,' a darned good 'bit off.' I once had a transaction with Mr. Richard Rushton, and he scooped nearly every shekel I possessed at the time. I'm glad he did, or I should never have struck a patch at Melrose Creek, or met you, Rolf."

"He's a scoundrel," said Rolf.

"He's all that, my boy. Not a pleasant sort of man to have hanging around Miss Briscoe. We must pot Mr. Rushton in time, Rolf, or he may force Briscoe to part with his only mortgageable commodity to him. I mean, with all due respect to you, Rolf, sell his daughter."

"He'll never do that," said Rolf, "although I believe Rushton would even be base enough to make him if he could."

"There's no telling what a man will do when he's hard pressed," said Nat. "But let's change the subject. What do you think we can float that mine for, Rolf?"

"No idea," said Rolf. "It'll fetch a big lump though."

"You're right. If I know anything about it, Smiley

and Standish's—beg pardon, Smith's—claim will float for half a million."

Rolf stared at the speaker aghast. Half a million! Could it be possible? Nat must be jesting with him. And he was to have half! He could not accept it.

Nat thought what troubled Rolf, and said :

"Halves I said. Half's yours, Rolf. It may not fetch that sum, but if you don't go halves I'll back down. Think what you could do with the money."

Rolf sighed. It would be easy to win Tilly with £250,000 to his credit.

"I'd pay all the Hon. Robert's mortgages off," said Rolf. "I'd have Tilly straight away. I'd go to Melbourne and win the Cup. I'd ——. Dash it all, I'd do everything."

"That's pretty fair for a start," laughed Nat. "But you may as well know that to get the Hon. Bob out of his troubles would make a big hole in your pile."

"Is he as hard hit as that?" said Rolf.

"You bet. Yeronga's pledged up to the hilt, and all that's on it."

Rolf was amazed. He had always regarded Briscoe as a wealthy man, and he knew Tilly thought her father had plenty of money.

"When shall you float the mine?" said Rolf.

"Ah, that's more like," said Nat. "In another twelve months we'll do it. I don't suppose that will be too late to assist your little scheme."

"It's a long time, Nat. I'd like to have a peep at the old place again before then. I must know how things are going on, but you see I'm pledged not to communicate with Tilly."

"I'm not pledged to anything of the kind," said Nat.

"I'll find out how the land lies, you may be sure.

We might take a run up to Sydney after the diggings races."

"When are they?" said Rolf.

"I forgot to tell you. In a month's time. Why not give Testator a spin in the Melrose Creek Handicap?"

"He's a bit better than most of the horses about here," said Rolf. "Good condition he's in too. A few gallops would soon put him right. We may as well enter him, Messrs. Smiley and Smith's Testator, by Forest King—Ermine. That'll do, won't it?"

"He's your horse, Rolf," said Nat. "Enter him in your own name."

"Halves," laughed Rolf. "I've got you this time, Nat. We share and share alike. If I have half the mine you must have half the horse, and a poor bargain on your side it will be."

"You seem to have hit my idea," said Nat. "I'll accept half the horse and you half the mine."

"Do many people enter horses for the race?" said Rolf.

"Well, you see the prize is a couple of hundred, and I daresay we shall have something sent up here to win it. I've known some real good horses start at a diggers meeting," said Nat.

"We'll enter Testator," said Rolf, "and I'll give him a few gallops at once. He's a real good one, and game as anything."

So it was settled Testator should start for the Melrose Creek Handicap, and Rolf commenced training the horse. Good animal as he had judged Testator to be he little thought what he had under him as he galloped the son of Forest King round the roughly-shaped and yet good-going bush track. Testator had a clean, easy style of moving, and with every gallop he improved

wonderfully. Nat Smiley, by no means a bad judge of a horse, watched Testator do his morning's work, and he came to the conclusion he must win the handicap. There were half-a-dozen local horses going for the race, and five had been entered from Bathurst, Orange, and elsewhere. Curiously enough one of these strange horses had been entered in Richard Rushton's name. What could have induced him to enter such an animal as Lobelia—a mare considered good enough to win a Sydney Cup almost? Rushton had mining interests at Melrose Creek, and Nat Smiley and Rolf surmised that hearing they were about to enter Testator he had sent in Lobelia's name in order to have the pleasure of preventing their horse winning the race.

Nat and Rolf talked the matter over, and came to the conclusion that Testator, with only a month's training, would be no match for Lobelia, but they still determined to run him.

"He'll probably be here himself just to see our defeat," said Nat.

"I never thought of that," said Rolf. "If he comes perhaps ——"

"I don't think so," said Nat, "but she might, and her father too. It's nothing for Miss Briscoe to ride forty or fifty miles, and they'd get a fair road here from Bathurst."

"She may come," said Rolf. "I wish she would. How I should like to see her again."

"Now, don't get sentimental; I can't stand that," said Nat. "Sentiment is out of place here. Melrose Creek's not the sort of place to gush about love in."

Rolf sighed. It was a long time since he had received any tidings from Yeronga.

It wanted a week to the Melrose Creek races, and

the small community were quite agitated in consequence.

Sundry small books had been opened, and the local hotel-keepers laid odds, and did a roaring trade at the bars in consequence.

Lobelia was a hot favourite, as it was reported she was a sure starter, and Host Murphy, of the Miners' Arms, had received intimation that Mr. Richard Rushton and party would be present, not merely to see the races, but to inspect some of the mines.

"He means business," said Nat. "I shouldn't wonder if we have a few bookmakers up. They'll be sure to hear about Lobelia, and as they know the miners back the local horses, they come on the off chance of making a hundred or two. It's not much use our backing Testator, and yet, hang it all, it goes against my grain to let him run without. Let's have a stroll down to the Miners' Arms and see what they are doing."

Rolf and Nat Smiley walked down to the hotel, and found quite a crowd congregated inside and around the doorway. They were both popular with the miners, and after a "shout" for all hands by Nat, one of the men said :

"It's hardly fair if Mr. Rushton brings that crack mare up here."

"He can do as he likes," said Nat. "We'll give him a good run with Testator."

"My nag will beat yours, Smiley," said Murphy, the landlord. "I'll bet you a tenner on that, anyway, for a place."

"I'll bet," said Nat. "Bobby's your horse, isn't he, Murphy?"

"That's the boy," said Murphy

"What will you lay Testator?" said Rolf.

"Five's," said Murphy.

"Not much odds, but I'll take fifty to ten any-way."

The bet was booked, and Murphy smiled. He had an idea Lobelia must win easily, and that his own horse could beat Testator.

The final spin of Testator was witnessed by several miners, and the horse went so well that many of them determined to have a pound or two on the Creek horse despite the reputation of Lobelia. Testator, with Rolf riding, went at a great pace; he was certainly on the big side, but that was only to be expected considering the small amount of work he had done. He was, however, the picture of health, and Rolf rode him splendidly.

Nat Smiley was quite satisfied with the gallop, and he thought Testator was a cut above such races as the Melrose Creek Handicap when fit.

The day before the carnival Rushton and party arrived, and put up at the Miners' Arms. There were also several people in the district present, but, to Rolf's disappointment, no Tilly. The Hon. Robert was with Rushton's people, and Rolf fancied he looked aged and careworn. He shook Rolf cordially by the hand when he met him at the hotel, but Rushton passed him by with a scowl.

"I hear you're doing well here, Rolf," said the Hon. Bob. "I'm glad of it," and he sighed.

"Yes, I'm getting along splendidly," said Rolf. "Might I ask how Miss Briscoe is?"

A kind of spasm of pain shot across Briscoe's face as he said,

"She's in perfect health. We leave Yeronga for a

time, and settle in Sydney shortly," he replied, with evident exertion.

"You don't look so well, Mr. Briscoe," said Rolf.

"I've had a good deal of worry and trouble, lad," was the reply. "Let's change the subject. I suppose Lobelia will win to-morrow. That fellow Rushton has the deuce's own luck ; he always falls on his feet."

"He'll have a pretty good task set him to beat Testator," said Rolf. "He's a real good horse, Mr. Briscoe, and I must again thank you for such a generous gift."

"No thanks, Rolf, lad. You deserved it. I hardly expect he'll beat Rushton's mare."

"We shall see," said Rolf, confidently. He moved away as he saw Rushton advancing.

"What's that cad been talking about, eh?" said Rushton.

"He's not a cad, Rushton," said Briscoe, "and no one know's that better than yourself. He merely said Testator would give Lobelia all she knew to beat him."

"Oh, he did," sneered Rushton. "Well, if you've got much spare cash to lose just plank it on your old horse, that's all. I must draw the fellow, and see if he'll bet."

Rushton talked loudly, and boasted about his mare.

"You talk about a half-bred brute like Testator having a chance," he laughed. "Why, I'll bet a hundred to fifty my mare beats him easily."

Rolf heard him, but took no notice of the remark.

"No one will take it," said Rushton, "I thought not. The poor devil that owns him hasn't the pluck, I suppose."

At this ungenerous remark there was a murmur from the crowd.

Rolf turned round and said quietly, "The poor

devils that own Testator—for there are two owners—will accept your bet, Richard Rushton, and you may book it.”

Rushton looked surprised, and, turning to Murphy, said loud enough for Rolf to hear :

“ I suppose the money’s right ? ”

Rolf turned as if to say some angry words. He controlled his temper and replied aloud, “ What do you say men ? Is our money good enough ? ”

There was a general chorus of assent, and such remarks as, “ It’s better nor his,” “ He’s a swell bloke, he is,” “ No chop that fellow,” and so on, were heard.

Rushton turned pale with rage, but he chuckled to himself as he thought what an easy task his mare had before her. There’s many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip, however, and Mr. Richard Rushton had discovered the truth of this saying more than once.

CHAPTER X.

ROLF SCORES A WIN.

A RACE-MEETING in a mining township is an event of great importance. Miners are, as a rule, enthusiastic lovers of horses. The spirit of gambling from the very nature of their calling being strong within them, they thoroughly enjoy racing. Melrose Creek races were not very different from other races in townships of similar size. The local course was cut out of the bush, as it were, and in one or two places the horses were obscured from view by the trees. It was, however, a well-formed track, and on this particular occasion the

going was good. The Creek was full of visitors. All kinds of vehicles had been brought into use, and the number of horsemen and horsewomen that flocked in from the surrounding district was large.

There was considerable excitement on the morning of the races, when it was found that a crack jockey, named Trot, was to ride Lobelia. It was evident Rushton was determined to win with the mare if possible. She carried nine stone, and had to concede Testator exactly a stone. Try all he could, Rolf found it impossible to get down to less than eight stone five pounds, and so he had determined to declare five pounds over-weight, although it must put his mount at a disadvantage. There had never been so much wagering over a small handicap before, and those bookmakers who had thought it worth while to make the journey were well repaid. All the visitors of importance were backing Lobelia, and her price stood at 5 to 4 on, while Bobby was next at 3 to 1, and Testator stood at 5's. A rude ring had been fenced in, and a small weighing shed and stewards' room erected. The arrangements were primitive, but everything was to be carried out in perfect order, and under the Jockey Club rules. The Hon. Robert Briscoe was one of the stewards, and it was evident that he was regarded as a man of considerable importance and influence.

As the time approached for the first event—there were five on the card—the crowd gathered on the course was curious. Bushmen in their typical costume. Bush girls on their rough horses, and by no means in fashionably cut habits, were there. They could ride anything, although some people would have been inclined to smile at their appearance. The miners were in great force, for it was a general holiday, and they betted

freely, and drank numerous potations at the booths. After the first two events had been disposed of, there was an hour's interval before the big handicap.

The candidates, seven in all, were followed about by an admiring crowd. Nat Smiley was leading Testator, and the jockey Trot was busy with the favourite. The host of the Miners' Arms deserted his booth to take a final look at his champion, Bobby. These were the only three horses worthy of much notice, with the exception of Old Tom, a digger's horse that had seen better days, but had a good deal of speed left in him yet.

Rushton had backed his mare heavily. The market was exhausted, and he could get no one to bet with him, even when he offered to lay 6 to 4 on.

As he walked across the small enclosure he met Rolf, who had been the first to weigh out, coming along with the saddle on his arm.

"Want to back your horse?" said Rushton.

"No, thanks," replied Rolf, "we've got about enough on him."

"Who's your partner?" said Rushton.

"Nat Smiley," said Rolf, "do you know him?"

Rushton started. "Yes, I know him. He's well off, I hear. They call him the 'lucky digger.' By Jove! you've met with a good piece of fortune to fall in with a man like that."

"Nat's a fine fellow," said Rolf. "He's been a real good friend to me."

"Come, have another wager on your horse," said Rushton.

"What'll you lay?" said Rolf.

"I'll bet you 60 to 40 my mare beats Testator," said Rushton.

"All right," said Rolf, and he was about to move on.

Rushton thought for one moment, and then following Rolf, said,

"We may as well be friends. Forget what happened at Yeronga. It's no use quarreling any more about it."

"I can never forget what happened at Yeronga," said Rolf, quietly. "You did me a cruel wrong and we can never be friends. Our paths lie wide apart, and the less we cross each other the better."

Rushton bit his lips as he said :

"Have it your own way. It matters very little to me what you do. Don't try to thwart any of my plans, that's all."

"That depends entirely upon circumstances," said Rolf.

"What do you mean," said Rushton, angrily.

"You know very well what I mean," said Rolf.

"If you allude to Miss Briscoe and myself, I may at once tell you that lady is my affianced wife," said Rushton, with a sneer.

Rolf turned pale. He looked Rushton hard in the face.

"It's another lie, Richard Rushton. I don't believe it. If it be so, then you must have forced her father to sell her to you."

"You ——," said Rushton in a rage, as he raised his hand to strike Rolf.

"Here stop that little game Dick Rushton," said Nat Smiley, as he caught his upraised arm. "If you don't I'll have you put out of the ring, and it won't be the first time, I'll bet."

Rushton turned round and saw Nat Smiley looking at him fiercely. He could not face his glance, and slunk away.

"He's a despicable cur," said Smiley. "Why lad, what's the matter," he went on, as he put his hand kindly on Rolf's shoulder.

"I'll tell you after, Nat. He told me a bitter piece of news, and I feel it is true."

"He couldn't tell the truth if he tried, Rolf. Take no notice of him. Beat him in the race, that will touch him more than anything else."

"I'll have a good try," said Rolf, as he brightened up.

The bell rang, and the horses were saddled. Rolf in his blue jacket looked a handsome, daring fellow, and Testator's coat shone like satin. The miners crowded round him and wished him all kinds of good luck. If the horse was not favourite it was quite evident Rolf was, and as Rushton saw the popularity his rival enjoyed he ground his teeth with rage. He went across to Trot, who had mounted the favourite, and said—

"You ought to win easily, Trot. Never mind any other horse in the race but Testator. He's not to win at any price. You must bear that in mind."

"All right, Mr. Rushton," said Trot. "But I fancy the mare will show a clean pair of heels to the field when once I let her have her head. But I'll keep my eye on the miner. I reckon I can ride a chap like that down."

"Yes, I think you capable of riding the fellow down," said Rushton with a self-satisfied air.

The horses were now on the course, and they had to start opposite the enclosure and go twice round.

A false start, and then the lot were off. Old Tom rushing away to the front with a couple of lengths lead of Bobby, with the favourite and Testator next. Not much occurred during the first round, but as they passed the box the second time it was seen that the race must be between Lobelia, Testator and Bobby, for Old Tom

had run himself to a standstill, and the others were out of it.

"Bravo, Rolf," shouted the miners, as the horses flashed past.

Testator was going remarkably well, much better than Rushton liked.

"We'll lick you this time, Rushton, if I'm a judge," said Nat Smiley.

"I'll bet you a level hundred you don't," said Rushton, angrily.

"Done," said Nat. "You can double it if you like."

His confident tone made Rushton hesitate, but he did not like to be beaten, so he made the wager a level £200.

The odds had now veered round a little, and Rushton heard the cry of "Even money the field." Was it possible the mare could be beaten? He did not think so. And then he had Trot to rely upon.

The horses were rounding the far bend and were hidden behind a clump of trees. As they came in sight Lobelia held a slight lead, with Testator next, and Rolf riding easily. It was an even race between the pair so far. Out of sight again and when in view once more it was seen that Testator had fallen back a good two lengths, and that Rolf was uneasy on him.

"I'll bet something's been up behind those bushes," said Nat to himself. "Rushton's not the man to stick at a trifle. I must ask Rolf about that."

On they came, and now the turn for home was reached. The miners shouted until they were hoarse. Testator was labouring heavily, but it was also evident that Lobelia had had about enough of it. The mare had been used to the smooth Randwick turf, and she did not relish the rather bumpy ground at Melrose Creek.

Gradually Testator made up his lost ground, and the excitement was intense. It was a great race, and Rolf was riding like a demon.

"By Jove! He's a grand horseman," involuntarily said Briscoe, "and I hope he'll win."

"So do I," said Nat, who was standing by. "Not for the sake of the cash, but because he's a fine fellow."

"So he is," replied the Hon. Robert.

A roaring cheer and a cry, "Testator wins!" from the crowd of miners.

Rushton turned pale, and looked at the horses. They were neck and neck now, and not fifty yards more to go.

Rolf was riding his horse hard, and the gallant animal answered at every stroke of the whip.

Trot was hard at work on Lobelia, and kept her going.

But it was soon all over. The mare tired visibly at the last few strides, and Rolf with a final effort landed Testator first past the post a clear half length to the good.

What cheering there was as he came to weigh in. As Rolf doffed his cap in answer to the salutations of the crowd a bright red mark could be seen on his forehead.

Nat Smiley saw it, and muttered to himself, "He's been hit with the whip by that brute, Trot. We'll have an inquiry into this affair."

Rolf weighed in all right, and after he had looked Testator over, Nat came to him and said :

"Well ridden, Rolf. It was a grand race, and we've beaten that scoundrel well. What's the mark on your head?"

"Trot hit me with the whip," said Rolf, "but I feel sure he did it accidentally. Say nothing about it, Nat, now we've won. There's bad blood enough between

Rushton and myself as it is without making any more."

"It nearly lost you the race, though," said Nat.

"By Jove it did," said Rolf. "He hit me behind that clump of trees, and the horse swerved at the same time. I fancy he meant to hit Testator, but I am glad he didn't. We should have lost the race had he done so."

"It goes against the grain to let the fellow off," said Nat, "but as you wish it, I'll let the matter drop."

"Thanks, old fellow; we'll pay them out some other time. Nat, my boy, we've got a real good 'un in Testator, and his win up here even over Lobelia won't be thought much of. I think the mare ought to have won. If it had been a fast course she would have beaten us. Testator, with real good training, will be a clinker."

At the Miners' Arms that night the settling over the races took place, and, as usual, a large crowd was present.

Rushton paid over his wagers with an ill grace, and complained that Trot said Rolf had jostled him on Testator, and put the mare out of her stride.

"Make that statement public," said Nat.

Rushton raised his voice and said :

"My mare had not fair play. Trot says Testator jostled her round by the bushes, and knocked her clean out of her stride. It's just like the beggar's tricks that rode the horse."

"You drop that game," said Nat. "Look here, lads," and he pointed to the weal on Rolf's forehead. "I said I'd say nothing about it, because Rolf asked me to let it drop. But I'll be hanged if I'll stand by and hear him falsely accused. That mark was caused by Trot striking him with his whip behind the bushes, and that's what

caused Testator to lose a couple of lengths there. What's more, I say that Trot did it by Dick Rushton's orders."

Rushton turned livid, and there was an angry murmur from the crowd.

"It's a d—— lie," he roared. "If Trot were here he would say so."

"You took dashed good care to have Trot out of the way to-night," said Nat.

"He went back to Bathurst," said Rushton. "He had to go to Sydney at once."

"That's all very fine," said two or three of the miners.

"This is a put up job," said Rushton. "The whole race was a confounded swindle."

"You just stow that kind of talk here," said the host of the Miners' Arms. "We run square here, and that's more nor some of you swells do on your big courses."

"That's right, mate, give it him hot," chorussed the crowd.

"Keep calm, Rushton," said the Hon. Robert, who had presided at the settling. "It's no good making a scene."

"They're a lot of d—— scoundrels," said Rushton.

"What's that you're saying?" said Nat Smiley.

"I say you're a lot of scoundrels to stop my mare," said Rushton.

An angry murmur again, and Nat said quietly,

"Do you include me in that list, Dick Rushton?"

"Please yourself," said Rushton.

Nat got him by the coat-collar, and in another instant would have had him out of the room had not Rolf interfered.

"Let him alone, Nat; he's not worth it," he said.

"You're right, Rolf, he's not. If you knew him as

well as I do, you'd say so. He's the scoundrel, and we're all honest men."

"Right you are, Nat!" cheered the crowd.

"I'll make you all pay for this," said Rushton, as he left the room.

His retreat was followed by a volley of groans and hoots.

Rushton was almost mad with rage.

"I'll make the brutes sweat for this. That fool Briscoe, too. Never spoke a word in my favour. Well, we shall see. Sydney next month, and if he don't hand over that charming Tilly—curse her!—I'll ruin him. I'll be even with her, and I'll make that fool Rolf suffer through her. That's the better way to get at him. Smiley's dangerous. I must think of some plan to get at him. He knows too much about me. He'd be much safer out of the way if I could manage it."

After Rushton's departure the remainder of the evening passed in a jovial manner, and the Hon. Robert Briscoe's spirits seemed to rise.

He walked outside the hotel with Rolf and Nat Smiley as they were leaving.

Rolf drew him on one side, and said :

"Mr. Briscoe, I hope you will not think me impertinent, but is Miss Briscoe engaged to be married to Mr. Rushton?"

"No," said Briscoe, hesitatingly.

"Thanks for that assurance," said Rolf. "It's taken a load off my heart. Good night, sir." And he joined Nat, and they walked homewards.

The Hon. Robert watched them down the street with wistful eyes.

"What a contrast!" he murmured. "And fancy Tilly in the power of such a man as Rushton! No, it

shall not be ! I'll sell everything I possess rather than give her to that man. Tilly was right. Rolf's worth a hundred such men as Dick Rushton."

CHAPTER XI.

TILLY IN TROUBLE.

RICHARD RUSHTON was terribly chagrined at his defeat at Melrose Creek races, and the scene which occurred at the settling rankled in his mind. He knew the kind of man Nat Smiley was, and felt in him he had an enemy to face. He was also mortified to think that Rolf Standish had such an excellent partner, and his mining speculations told him that Rolf stood in a very fair way of making a fortune. The last thing he desired was for Rolf to obtain possession of wealth, because, if he did so, Rushton knew the man well enough to know that a large portion of it would be devoted to getting Briscoe out of his power. He determined to force matters to a crisis, and, when the Hon. Robert and Tilly arrived in Sydney, to have an understanding at once.

To have Tilly he was determined, cost what it might. She had treated him in the most contemptuous manner ever since the scene on the verandah at Yeronga, and he had never forgiven her. At one time he had loved her in his own selfish way, but now he hated her. Once in his power he meant to pay her back with interest for all the slights she had put upon him. He knew she loved Rolf Standish, and this made him the more desirous of obtaining possession of her. Little did Tilly dream of

the storm brewing, nor did she know of the difficulties in which her father was placed.

It was a hard struggle for the Hon. Robert to leave Yeronga, and still harder for him to almost force Tilly to accompany him to Sydney. However, they went, and Miss Rowton with them, and Fred Martin was left in charge.

Fred had an idea there was something wrong, and "all along of that fellow Rushton." He wished he could hear from Rolf, just to put him on his guard, for he felt his rival on the spot would use his utmost endeavours to gain possession of Tilly.

One stipulation Tilly had made when going to Sydney, and that was Coal Queen should go too. She did not mean to part with the fine black mare. Coal Queen had improved in her manners considerably, and was now quite tractable, although at times a trace of the old fiery spirit showed itself. Once in Sydney, Rushton took good care to press his suit.

Briscoe had taken a furnished house at Paddington, and Tilly and Miss Rowton were installed there.

Rushton called one night and had a long interview with Robert Briscoe.

"I know I owe you a large sum, Rushton," said Briscoe, "but I fancy after a couple of good seasons I shall be able to pay you off, with interest. That Golden Crown mine swallowed up a lot of my capital, and I fancied it was a real good thing."

"So did I," said Rushton. "I dropped a heap of money in it myself, several thousands, and that's what is pushing me short a bit."

This was a lie, for Rushton had made a large sum of money out of the mine, including the amount lost by Briscoe.

"Yeronga will yield a big return this year," said Briscoe. "It's well stocked, and I know things will sell high. I must have time, and that's the long and short of it. It won't hurt you to wait another year. I'll pay you a good lump sum in a couple of months, and let the other stand over."

"I'm afraid I can't wait," said Rushton. "I don't want to seem hard, and I have been most lenient with you. But fifty thousand pounds is a lot of cash, and I have to find that in a few months. You owe me twenty thousand, without interest, and I must have it."

"Nonsense, man. Why what's £20,000 to what I own. A hundred thousand is more like it. Yeronga would fetch the sum I owe you, and several thousand to boot."

"You forget the bulk of the money is lent on Yeronga," said Rushton.

"I know that. But it's useless talking about taking it up now. Yeronga would sell well enough, I have no doubt, but I would never consent to part with the old place."

"There's one way out of the difficulty," said Rushton. "I'll get the money I want elsewhere if you'll do what I ask you. I love Miss Briscoe, and would make her my wife, and you know it."

"But the unfortunate part of the business is she does not love you," laughed Briscoe.

"That will come in time. If you give your sanction to our marriage, she'll obey you."

"I would never force my child to marry a man she did not love," said Briscoe, coldly.

"There is no occasion for force. Let me plead my own cause with your consent," said Rushton.

"You have done so already and she has rejected you.

I can't force her, Rushton, and you know it," said Briscoe.

"I believe she's still hankering after that scoundrel you had on your station. A nice piece of scandal that incident would make if it got about Sydney. One of the Hon. Robert Briscoe's station-hands seen coming out of his daughter's bedroom at midnight. It's true, too. I can believe my own ears and eyes, whatever you think," said Rushton.

"The less you say about that incident the better," said Briscoe. "I believe what my daughter told me about it. People in Sydney will never learn anything about that."

"They might," said Rushton, with a sneer.

Briscoe looked at him with a glance of contempt. Would this man be such a dastardly coward as to try and ruin his daughter's reputation. As he watched Rushton's evil face he thought even such an act of perfidy as this was not beyond him.

"If you dare to breathe a word of what occurred that night at Yeronga," said Briscoe, "I'll expose you as a thorough-paced scoundrel. No one can learn what happened except you tell them."

"Oh, I shan't tell anyone," said Rushton ; "I've too much respect for your character, my friend."

"I think the sooner you cease to persecute Tilly with your attentions the better," said Briscoe.

"Persecute her. That's not bad for you. I mean to marry Miss Briscoe, and you shall make her accept me. I'll give you a month to consider matters over."

"And I shall refuse at the end of the month," said Briscoe. "You might as well save time and take the refusal now."

"No, you won't refuse, Briscoe. If at the end of the

month you don't give your sanction to my marrying Tilly, I'll sell Yeronga, every blessed stick and stone of it," said Rushton.

Briscoe gave a slight shudder. If he let Yeronga go he felt it would kill him. It was the old place his father had bought with hard earned money, and it would be sacrilege to part with it.

Rushton saw the hesitation expressed in his face, and said—

"Come, Briscoe, don't let us quarrel. I don't want to be hard on you. I'll settle a large sum on Tilly, and I'll make her a good husband. Think the matter over well."

"Ask me anything but that," said Briscoe. "I love my daughter dearly, and yet I could not bear to part with Yeronga. I'll find the money before the month's up and pay you in full, Rushton."

Rushton smiled. From his knowledge of the state of the money market and the hold the banks as well as himself had on Briscoe, he felt his chance of getting the money was remote. He could afford, he fancied, to be generous without much risk, so he said: "If you get the cash by the end of the month, Briscoe, I'll accept it; but on condition that you let me marry Miss Briscoe if she gives her consent."

"Thanks, Rushton. You can have her if she gives her consent."

Briscoe felt that Tilly's consent would never be given under any circumstances. He had enough faith in her to know that if he told her all she would sacrifice herself for him. But he could not do that. Where could he get the money? He sat for an hour after Rushton's departure thinking the matter over. A couple of years ago it would have been an easy matter for the

Hon. Robert Briscoe to raise £20,000, but now he felt he was in a hole.

"I must get it somehow," he thought. "Rushton's a hard fist, and he'll want his money by the end of the month. What day of the month is it? Hang it all, it's the 12th now. How the deuce shall I raise the wind? Well, Tilly, my girl, what is it?" The last exclamation was uttered as his daughter came into the room.

Tilly looked the same handsome, fresh-complexioned girl that Rolf parted with at Yeronga. But there was a seriousness about her face that would not have been noticed before. Trouble had come upon Tilly, and she was not so light-hearted as in former days.

"Has that horrid man gone, father?" she said, as she put one fair arm around his neck and looked lovingly into his face.

"Rushton's gone, Tilly. But why do you call him a horrid man?" he laughed.

"He is, and you know it," said Tilly. "He worries you, dad. What hold has that man over you?"

Briscoe was startled. "Hold! None, my child. What made you think he had?"

"Because he told me one day that he could do you a great favour if I gave my consent to something he asked me. He said you were in difficulties, father. What did he mean?"

A smothered ejaculation came from Briscoe's lips. "So the fellow had been carrying tales to his daughter."

"I am a little troubled with money matters just now, Tilly," he said. "But it will soon be all right. Most people are troubled in that way at times."

"Do you owe Mr. Rushton money, father?" she said. He did not answer, and she asked him again.

"Yes," he replied.

"I knew it. What does he want you to do, father?" she said.

"Pay him of course, dear," laughed Briscoe.

"Nothing more?" she said.

"Don't ask silly questions, Tilly," he said, irritably.

"He wants to marry me, father."

"And you——" said Briscoe.

"How can you ask such a question? I love Rolf, and I hate that fearful man."

"You shall never marry him unless you wish, dear," said Briscoe.

"Oh, you dear, good dad," she replied, as she kissed him, "I fancied he might have some great hold over you, and wanted to force you to consent to his marriage with me."

"And if such were the case?" said Briscoe.

"Then, father, I would sacrifice all to save you. But don't let us talk about such matters."

A fortnight went by, and Briscoe could not raise the money required. He tried hard, but failed at every point. He received a letter from Rushton hinting the time was drawing to a close. The letter ended thus: "If you cannot find the money I must foreclose, and Yeronga must go to the hammer. There is one way out of the difficulty. If I marry your daughter I will, on the morning of the wedding, hand you the deeds of Yeronga Station as a wedding gift to her."

Poor Briscoe! To lose Yeronga. What a disgrace! And yet he felt there was no hope. The dear old place must go. He could not force Tilly into such a match. She had said she would sacrifice herself for him, but he could never accept it. He would have one more chance. He would make a last attempt to raise the wind.

He put the letter as he thought in his pocket and

went out. It was merely the envelope, the letter itself had fallen on to the floor. Tilly came into the room soon after he had left, and the first thing she saw was the letter lying against the table.

She picked it up to place it in the letter-rack when the lower portion opened, and she saw Richard Rushton's name. She hesitated. Had she a right to read it? With that name attached she felt she had. It concerned herself as well as her father. She opened and read it.

"If you cannot find the money I must foreclose, and Yeronga must go to the hammer. There is one way out of the difficulty. If I marry your daughter I will on the morning of the wedding hand you the deeds of Yeronga Station as a wedding gift to her."

She could hardly comprehend it all at first. The words burnt into her brain. "Yeronga must go to the hammer." Her dear old home be sold. Her father driven out of the place he loved so well. Oh, it was horrible! cruel! And she could save him. She could save Yeronga and save her father. That father who had never denied her slightest wish since her babyhood.

"Poor old dad," she murmured. Her first thought was for her father. You see Tilly was a squatter's daughter. She was not a well bred town beauty. She loved her father.

She was "too forward with the men," said lady ——. "Bold as brass," said Mrs. Grundy. "Rides about unattended, my dear. Shocking is it not?" said Miss Gusher, whose character was none too good. And yet Tilly thought of her father before herself. He must be saved pain as any cost. She sat down to think. What was this dull gnawing sensation at her heart. "Rolf," she murmured, "Dear old Rolf," He was young, but

hat didn't matter. He was only her father's station hand. Awful, was it not, to call him, "dear old Rolf"?

"What will he think of me," she shuddered, as she thought of Richard Rushton. What a life would hers be linked with a man like that. She knew he hated her, and desired to possess her merely to gratify his own selfish feelings. "Married to Rushton. She could not do it."

"Yeronga Station must go to the hammer." Those were the words. She must do it. She must save her father. She would accept Rushton.

A gleam of hope. If she accepted him it would stave off the evil day, and she need not marry him at once. He would surely grant her a few months' grace. What might not happen in that time?

When the Hon. Robert returned home Tilly met him with a bright smile.

How haggard and careworn he looked. She noticed it more now, and sighed.

"Father, when will Mr. Rushton call again," she said.

He looked at her in surprise. "Why, child?" he asked.

"Because I want to have a talk with him."

"You want to have a talk with him. Why, I thought you hated the sight of him."

"Never mind what I do, father. I wish to see him on a matter of importance."

Briscoe felt guilty. He felt he knew what that matter of importance was. He clutched at the hope it gave him. Perhaps Tilly might get Rushton to alter his plans. At any rate there could be no harm in her seeing him. He said: "He will be here on Friday, Tilly, and you can see him then. What's your important business with him?"

"I'll tell you after I have seen him," she said, gaily. "It's a mere trifle, but I fancy I can assist you if I see him."

A mere trifle. Great Heaven, and her heart was almost bursting at the thought of it.

"There's nobody like our Miss Tilly," said honest Fred Martin, and he was right.

That night Tilly felt about ten years older. "Oh! Rolf! Rolf!" she cried. "Save me from this awful fate. God is good. He will never let me sell myself to that man."

That same night Rolf Standish and Nat Smiley were travelling over the Blue Mountains by the mail on a trip to Sydney. Sleep, Tilly, without fear. Your brave little heart is not broken yet.

CHAPTER XII.

A DEAL IN HORSEFLESH.

THE western mail arrived safely at Redfern, and Rolf Standish and his mate Nat Smiley quickly found themselves in a hansom, rattling down George Street to their hotel. It was early morning, about 6 o'clock, and very few people were astir, with the exception of some early workers. George Street looked desolate. Here and there passers-by could be seen, and "hot coffee" men were located at the street corners. In another hour there would be a change, and by 9 o'clock the big city would be all life and bustle.

After a hearty breakfast, the two miners, for such they may be termed, felt ready for a day's enjoyment.

Rolf was reading the *Morning Herald* when he came across an advertisement which seemed to take his fancy.

"What are you so deeply interested in, Rolf?" said Nat. "Births, deaths, and marriages; the personal advertisements, or what is it?"

"Don't deal much in any of those articles," said Rolf, laughing. "There's an auction sale of some blood horses I see this morning at Kiss' bazaar. There's a colt by Forest King, dam's pedigree unknown. He'll go cheap, I've no doubt, and Testator's a good sample of what sort the King can get. I should not wonder if the dam is one of the good ones we occasionally see out West, with a bit of cross blood in their veins. I'll buy the colt if he goes cheap."

"We can have a look at him," said Nat. "He'll make a good hack, at any rate, and we want another or two up at the Creek. We've nothing else to do, so we may as well stroll round there. What time does the affair commence?"

"Twelve," said Rolf. "We have plenty of time before that."

They went out and passed the morning away pleasantly until the time arrived to proceed to the Bazaar.

There was a motley assemblage of people there. Some good horses were to be submitted, and many well-known racing men and trainers were present.

Amongst the crowd Rolf saw Rushton, and when the latter caught sight of him and Smiley he did not appear to be over well pleased. The Melrose Creek incident had not yet passed out of Rushton's mind, and he was desirous of having his revenge.

"There's that fellow Rushton as surly as ever," said

Nat. "What a scowl he always has on his face. I wonder the police don't run him in on spec."

"Give him rope enough and he'll hang himself some of these days," said Rolf, "and save expense."

Several horses were submitted and knocked down at fair prices. A colt by Goldsborough fell to the bid of Rushton at 300 guineas, and he looked a likely sort of animal.

The colt by Forest King was two years old, and although not taking at first sight, when examined thoroughly he had racing qualities of no mean order. Not a handsome colt by any means, but full of bone and muscle. Well built, with powerful loins and good neck, well set into his deep shoulders. He stood straight on his limbs and as round as a roach.

"Not a bad sort," said Nat. "He's not a horse likely to fetch much money, but if I'm not mistaken he'll make a racer."

"I like him immensely," said Rolf. "He's worth going for, and I mean to have a bid."

"Now gentlemen," said the auctioneer, "here's a colt by Forest King. The dam's pedigree is unknown, but the colt's looks speak for themselves. Forest King is a rising sire, and you may recollect a son of his beat the grand mare, Lobelia, the other day."

"Where was that race run?" asked a voice in the crowd.

"At Melrose Creek. An up-country meeting, but the fact is none the less true that a horse called Testator, by Forest King, beat Lobelia. Mr. Rushton's here, ask him," said the auctioneer, with a twinkle in his eye.

Rushton on being appealed to, growled out that his mare was beaten, but it was not a fair race. "Had it

not been for a jostle the mare would have won easily," he said.

"Never mind what might have been, gentlemen," said the auctioneer. "Give me a bid for the colt, by Forest King."

"Twenty guineas," said Rolf.

"You don't say so," said the auctioneer. "Now, gentlemen, look at that colt and tell me if he oughtn't to be offended at such an offer."

"Twenty-five," said a voice.

"Thirty," said Rolf.

"No advance," said the auctioneer. "Really, gentlemen, this is absurd. I shall have to pass him if there's advance, and he can be treated for privately afterwards."

There was no advance on Rolf's bid of thirty guineas, and the colt was passed in.

After the sale Nat said—

"What about the colt, Rolf. Shall we have another look at him?"

"Let him go, Nat. Thirty's about a fair price. Besides we don't want him very badly."

"We!" said Nat, laughing.

"Halves," said Rolf, and the pair had another hearty laugh over their old compact of halving everything between them.

They were leaving the yard when a dilapidated individual sidled up to them and touched his hat.

"Beg pardon, gents," he said, "but didn't one of you bid for that colt by Forest King?"

"I did," said Rolf; "what about it?"

"You buy that colt, sir; he's a real good 'un. I'm not making no game of ye. I know where he's bred, and his dam's as clean bred as a mare can be. I don't know her pedigree, but looks is enough for me."

Rolf glanced at this seedy-looking man, and hesitated. Perhaps he was an old station hand and knew all about the colt.

"Who owns the colt?" said Rolf.

"Never you mind who owns him mister. You just buy him and ask no questions. It's all right; you needn't fear he was lagged; he's honest bought, and no mistake."

Rolf laughed as he said:

"You appear to be pretty well up in the colt's history. Perhaps he belongs to you?"

"And what if he does, sir. I wasn't as hard up always as I am now. I'm forced to sell the colt, or d—— me I'd never part with him. I know what he can do. He's worth more nor that Goldsbrough Dick Rushton bought, I can tell yer."

"Come and have a drink," said Nat, "and we'll talk it over. If it's all right about the colt I daresay we can come to a deal."

They went down Pitt Street and turned up King Street, and passed into the Metropolitan. Having got into a quiet corner they sat down for a chat.

"Where did you get the colt?" said Nat.

"I bred him," said the strange man.

"You bred him!" they said in surprise.

"Yes, I bred him, and I say his dam's as good a mare as ever dropped a foal, although I can't trace her pedigree."

"You've come down in the world then?" said Nat.

"I have. I had a decent farm on the plains out West, and for some years I made it pay well. Then I took to speculating, and dropped money. I went in for horse racing, and dropped more, and finally I took to "Jim Hennessy," and swallowed what I had left. Every

blessed thing went except the colt. I swore the sharks should not have him, so I sent him off to a neighbours, where he was hid snug until after they'd sold the old place up. They didn't get him, and by —— they never shall. I'll cut his throat first. When I saw this gentleman bid for him I asked who he was, and Dick Rushton said he was the fellow that owned Testator, and that did him out of the race at Melrose Creek. I thought being a Forest King colt you might like to have him, sir."

"So that's his history, eh!" said Nat. "Well, mate you're not the first man's had a knock down blow in this country. My mate and I have both been hard hit, but we're picking up now. What are you doing for a living?"

"When I've sold the colt I mean to go up country again. I'll try the Creek, I think. There's some good diggings there, I hear."

"You might do worse," was all Nat said.

"What do you want for the colt?" said Rolf.

"He's dirt cheap at fifty pounds, sir, and you shall have him for that."

"It's too much," said Rolf. "You only had thirty bid in the sale ring."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said the man, "I hear you've got a claim at Melrose Creek. You take me on there and let me work for you. If the colt turns out well, give me a hundred for him, I mean if he wins a race. If he don't, I'll be content with the thirty you offered in the yard."

"What do you say, Nat?" said Rolf.

"Oh, I'm agreeable. Please yourself, mate. A hand extra won't matter much to us, and I like the look of our friend here."

"It's a bargain then," said Rolf. "If he wins a decent

race you shall have a hundred, and I'll give you the thirty for him now, as you seem to want it."

"Many thanks, sir. It's a bargain."

"By-the-bye, what's your name?" said Rolf.

"David Hilton, at your service."

"Very well, David. The bargain's struck, and we'll take the colt. He can remain at Kiss' until we want to take him back. I hope he'll turn out as good as you expect."

"I'm certain of it. There's a big race in that colt. He's bound to come on a lot, and he'll be a raking three-year-old. He gallops well, and is as quiet as a lamb. I've ridden him a good many miles already," said Hilton.

"I'll give you a cheque for the £30 now," said Rolf as he wrote out the amount. "We leave Sydney next week, so you can find your way up to the Creek as soon as you like after that."

"Thanks, sir. I'll not forget this kindness, and I'm sure to get the hundred for that colt. I'll be up at Melrose Creek next week."

And so the colt by Forest King was purchased, and David Hilton, ex-farmer, was engaged at the Lucky Diggers' Mine.

"A curious sort of deal this," said Rolf. "I wonder how it will turn out."

"Somehow I like that fellow," said Nat. "I've known lots of men like him. Real good fellows at the bottom, but darned fools to themselves. He'll make a good man, and you bet, Rolf, that colt's right or he would not have taken so much trouble to keep him."

"Suppose he should turn out a real clinker! What a stroke of luck it would be!" said Rolf.

"More unlikely things than that," said Nat.

"We've got a good line to go on with Testator now, because he ran such a great race with Lobelia, and he wasn't half fit. If the colt can beat Testator at level weights I wouldn't put a Sydney Cup past him."

"We must have a spin with them," said Rolf, "and see what the new purchase is made of."

"What shall we call him?" said Nat.

"Blest if I know. You see we don't know his dam's name or we might get a real good one for him."

"I've got it," said Nat. "He's by Forest King and the dam's pedigree unknown. Let's call him The Outlaw."

"The very thing," said Rolf, "that's a real good name, Nat. Besides, he has had a curious career so far. So be it. We'll call him The Outlaw."

"Let's crack a bottle over it," said Nat, and the champagne was brought in.

They drank the health of The Outlaw in bumpers foaming over.

"It is the rummiest deal in horseflesh I've ever made," said Nat. "Fancy, if he turns out a clinker, getting him for a hundred, and £30 down."

"Don't seem much, does it?" said Rolf. "He looks a gentleman, and we'll soon find out whether he is."

To finish up the day they went to the theatre, and after that they strolled round the City by gaslight.

"Shan't be sorry when we get back to the creek," said Rolf.

"Tired of city life already?" laughed Nat.

"Yes, I am. I've not had a very pleasant experience of city life in Australia," said Rolf.

"Wait till we sell the mine," said Nat; "you can have your fling then,"

"All I want is to settle down," said Rolf. "You forget someone is waiting for me."

"No I don't lad," said Nat. "I never forget it. You shall have that lass if I have to give you my share as well."

"You generous friend," said Rolf. "Come down here, Nat."

They turned down Macquarie Street until they were nearly opposite the Legislative Assembly.

"Look here, Nat," said Rolf, "this was where I first met Robert Briscoe. Had I not come down here that night I should never have met Tilly or known you. What strange chances there are in this world. I was nearly dead from hunger then. I had not had a square meal for two or three days. It must have been the hand of fate guided me here that night."

"Perhaps it was, lad. I for one am thankful the fates did so. I have found a friend in you, Rolf; a man I can trust. And you will be my only companion," said Nat, with a sigh.

"Nonsense, mate. You'll meet her some day," laughed Rolf.

"I have met her," said Nat, quietly.

"And she—is she dead?" said Rolf.

"Worse," said Nat, with a groan.

Rolf laid his hand on his mate's arm, and said, "I'm sorry I spoke, Nat. There's my hand, old mate. I'll never speak of it again. You shall find in me a true friend."

"I know it, lad. 'Stand By;' that shall be our motto, eh, Rolf?" said Nat.

"It shall, and may we never forget it."

Two men passed hurriedly by them, and as they did so, they heard one of them say, "It's no use, Briscoe."

I will have it by the end of the month. I cannot wait a day longer."

"That's Rushton's voice," said Rolf. "What can he mean?"

"Mean? Why, that by the end of this month the Hon. Robert Briscoe will be a ruined man unless we can help him."

"Is he in that fellow's power?" said Rolf.

"Certain," laconically said Nat.

"How can we help him?" said Rolf.

"It's too soon to sell out," said Nat. "He must take his chance. Perhaps after all Rushton won't press him too hard."

"If I could see Miss Briscoe it would be easier to get at the truth," said Rolf.

"Suppose I see her?" said Nat.

"That might do," said Rolf.

"Better leave it to chance," said Nat. "I've an idea all will come right. Briscoe can surely raise the money if it is absolutely necessary."

They little knew the sorry plight the Hon. Robert Briscoe was in, and it was as well for Rolf's peace of mind he did not.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CHANCE MEETING.

TILLY BRISCOE was almost worried to death. Since she had asked her father to grant an interview with Richard Rushton she had been very uneasy. She knew the man well, and felt he would give her no loophole of escape. She must sell herself to save her father. That was the only conclusion she could arrive at. She could not make up her mind to see Rushton until every other chance of escape was gone. How she detested the man who could thus force his attentions upon a defenceless woman. She had not forgotten that scene at Yeronga, where he accused her of the basest conduct. She never would forget it.

Tilly was unaware of the arrival of Rolf and his companion in Sydney.

It was the morning after Rolf and Nat had the conversation in Macquarie Street, and the former had gone out for a stroll, and to have a think, so he said.

Rolf wended his way mechanically until he came to the Botanical Gardens. Here he paused a moment, and then entered the gate. He strolled down the walks, lined on either side with picturesque flower-beds and well cut grass plots, until he reached the parapet alongside the harbour. He leaned over and watched the blue water rippling against the wall. He looked out upon the beautiful scene, and saw white-winged yachts dancing about in the sunlight. How long he ruminated he knew not.

Suddenly he heard voices near him. Two ladies in conversation and walking along the pathway. What

was it made him stare, and sent a thrill through his veins. The tone of one of the speakers sounded sweet and yet melancholy. Rolf had heard them oftentimes, and they had a peculiarly soothing effect upon him after his first surprise was over.

He turned around and raised his hat as Tilly Briscoe and Miss Rowton approached.

Tilly gave an exclamation of surprise—glad surprise—as she saw who it was confronted them. She had not anticipated meeting Rolf, and therefore it was the more pleasant to find him near her in the hour of her trouble. She felt he would assist her in some way.

Candid greetings were exchanged, for although Miss Rowton acted the part of duenna, she was by no means unfriendly towards Rolf.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," Rolf said, as he shook hands with them.

"I had no idea you were in Sydney," stammered Tilly, all blushes. "I am sure father will be pleased to see you again."

"How well you look," said Miss Rowton. "I fancy you have found comfortable quarters since you left Yeronga."

"Yes, I have been very lucky," said Rolf, "although I had a narrow escape of dying of thirst in the bush on my way to Melrose Creek."

"How did that happen?" said Tilly.

"It is a long story, and I must reserve it," said Rolf. "Sufficient to say that through the exertions of a very good friend I was saved."

Miss Rowton felt she was *de trop*. She hardly liked to leave Tilly and Rolf together, and yet she thought there could be no harm in it. So she said :

"Tilly, I forgot, I have several purchases to make.

Probably Mr. Smith does not like shopping, I don't know many gentlemen that do. You can stay here and have a chat over old times, and I will be back in about an hour."

Rolf could have hugged her heartily as she said this. He merely raised his hat and hoped she would not be long away.

When Miss Rowton had disappeared, Rolf could restrain himself no longer.

"Tilly, my darling," he commenced, "I have been longing to see you ever since I left Yeronga. That night I lay dying, as I thought, in the bush, my thoughts were with you, and I felt how hard it would be to leave you for ever. I have been working hard, Tilly, ever since I left you, and I think, thanks to a kind friend, that fortune will soon be within my grasp. Then I can claim my own darling."

"Oh, Rolf, I am in such trouble," she said. "You don't know how glad I am to see you. I feel you can advise me and assist me."

"Is your father in trouble or are you, Tilly?" said Rolf.

"Dear old dad is in the clutches of Mr. Rushton, and he threatens to sell Yeronga at the end of this month if father does not find the money or—" and she hesitated.

"Or what?" asked Rolf, anxiously.

"Oh, how can I say it, Rolf? That odious man wants to marry me, and if I consent he will forfeit all claim to father's land and release him from debt. But what a fearful sacrifice!"

"And you," said Rolf; "what do you mean to do, Tilly?"

"I am almost distracted. I hardly know what to do,

I fancied if I let Rushton imagine I acquiesced in his views he might grant father time. But it is horrible to think of that man hanging about me," she said in distress.

"He's a scoundrel," said Rolf, "By Heaven, Tilly, you shall never marry that man. I'll sell every chance I have sooner than that should happen. My darling, how you must have suffered from that man's persecutions. Is your father very heavily in his debt, Tilly?"

"I'm afraid so," she said, "I understand very little about it, but I know father is in deep trouble and distress, and there is only one way I can see to relieve him. But I cannot do that, Rolf; oh! I cannot do that."

Rolf ground his teeth with rage at the bare idea of Tilly being forced to marry Richard Rushton. If matters could only be shelved for a while, he thought he saw his way to raise the money to pay Rushton off.

"Tilly, you're a brave girl ever to have thought of such a sacrifice," he said. "In a month or two I think my mate will agree to sell the mine we are working. I must tell you a secret, dear. It is a very rich claim, and Nat Smiley—that is my mate—says it is worth a mint of money. We expect to get better results by then, and of course it will sell the more readily, I'll see if I can raise the money your father requires on the prospects of the mine floating well?"

"But I know it's a very large sum," said Tilly; "it is over £20,000 I believe."

"Whew!" whistled Rolf, "that makes matters much worse. I could never raise that on future prospects." They were silent. Each felt how much depended upon the issue of the next few days, for it was near the end of the month.

"You must let things take their course for a time,

Tilly," he said. "Perhaps your father will find the money. At all hazards you must not be sacrificed merely to save Yeronga."

"It would kill father to leave Yeronga," she said, "and he has been such a kind, indulgent father to me. I would do anything to save him from trouble or pain."

"My own brave girl, I know you would," said Rolf, "but I cannot bear the thought of that hound Rushton paying his addresses to you."

"You will have to trust me, Rolf, implicitly. Whatever you hear you must place faith in me. I must save father. I may have to act a double part, but with such a man what else can be done. I am sure Rushton hates me, and merely desires to wreak his vengeance on me when he gains possession. You can and will trust me, won't you, Rolf," she said, pleadingly, as she put her hand on his arm and looked into his face.

"I must, Tilly," he said, "but it is hard to leave you like this, almost at the mercy of such a man as Richard Rushton. I will trust you, Tilly, come what may. I know I have your love, and that will stand against all the world. You must promise me one thing, Tilly." "What is that?" she said.

"You must never under any circumstances be forced to marry Richard Rushton."

"Never, Rolf," she said, and looked at him with her clear, truthful eyes. "I'd sooner kill myself," and she meant it.

"Keep a brave heart, Tilly," he said, "and all will come right in the end."

And then Rolf told her of all that had happened since he left Yeronga. He pictured that dreadful loneliness in the bush, when he felt the hand of death grip his shoulder, and saw Tilly's fair face in his dreams. He

told of the gallant rescue by Nat Smiley and his mates, and how he had become partner in one of the richest mines on Melrose Creek. And then he related how Testator had beaten Lobelia, and of the scene in which Rushton played such an ignominious part. Tilly listened and she forgot her troubles in the joy of being near Rolf, and hearing his voice.

But time and Miss Rowton wait for no man, or lovers. Punctual to the minute, and not without sundry misgivings that she had done wrong, she arrived at the walk.

"Here's Miss Rowton," said Tilly, "I am afraid our interview will have to end, Rolf."

"I could not resist the temptation of a chat, my darling," said Rolf, "although I promised your father I would not try to see you or write to you."

"Nor have you done so?" she said. "It was quite a chance meeting, and no one is to blame for it. If father knew how much easier I feel now he would not say a word about it. I wanted an explanation, Rolf. It was the thought that you might misunderstand me made my task so much harder. Now I fancy I see a way to make Mr. Richard Rushton do what I desire, and without much sacrifice on my part."

"God bless you, Tilly, and may he preserve you from all harm," said Rolf.

Miss Rowton having resumed her charge, she marched Tilly off, leaving Rolf once more disconsolate. He watched the slight delicate figure until it disappeared and waived her a parting adieu.

"When shall I see her again," he murmured. "How beautiful and good she is. What a devil that fellow Rushton is. I'll be even with him yet for all this trouble."

Rolf picked up a pebble and cast it viciously into the water, as though he wished it had been Rushton he was consigning to the deep. He hardly knew what to do. Nat would be gone out all that morning. He'd take a stroll to the Quay, and have a trip to Watson's Bay.

He went an met with no adventures. Watson's Bay he found all very well, but it did not suit him in his present frame of mind, so he came back by the first boat.

"Hang it all, what an infernal place Sydney is for an idle man," he said to himself.

He walked about but could not get rid of an uneasy feeling that all would not be well with Tilly. Why the deuce didn't he go and see her father, and face the matter boldly. To lose Yeronga would be a sore blow to the Hon. Robert, but it would be a trifle compared with the loss of his daughter. That infernal Rushton seemed to be always crossing his path. "Hallo!" he said.

The "hallo" was addressed to David Hilton, who had almost stumbled up against Rolf as he walked along.

David had evidently been having an interview with his old mate James Hennessy. He smelt like a second-hand gin shop before it is swept out in the morning. David looked seedy; more than that, David was unclean. He hadn't been washed that morning at all events. He rolled in his gait, and altogether his appearance was not prepossessing.

"He's been knocking down the check I gave him," thought Rolf. Hang it all, I might have known he would. What a fool I was to give it to him before he got to Melrose Creek. Poor devil, he can't help it, I suppose."

"How do," hiccoughed David. "'Pon my word I'sh a bit groggy. Come have liquor."

"I think you've had quite enough, Hilton," said Rolf,

quately. "A nice sort of fellow you are to come and live with us at the Creek. I've a good mind to cancel the engagement. We don't like 'boozers' about our mine."

"S'help me bob, I'll never take 'nother drop," said David.

"Oh yes you will," said Rolf. "You'll have a nip as soon as I leave you. Hilton, you've been making a beast of yourself."

"No s'help me. I'll just have (hic) one more," he said.

"All right, and let that be the last," said Rolf.

"Come with me," said Hilton.

Rolf hesitated. The man was very far gone, so he thought it might be a kindness to stay with him. He could not persuade Hilton to keep out of a small low public-house he insisted in visiting down Lower George-street.

There was a peculiar looking crowd of men in the bar. Some sailors, some wharf labourers, one or two coolies, and several loafers.

Hilton called for two drinks, and pulled out a few sovereigns.

The eyes of the greedy men hanging about the counter fastened upon them at once. One or two commenced to whisper together.

Rolf saw all this, but said nothing. He made Hilton drink his brandy, and then dragged him towards the door.

A burly fellow stood in the way, and made it difficult for them to pass.

"Where are you a shoving to," he growled, as Rolf pulled Hilton past him.

Rolf never spoke, but Hilton shouted "Who's pushing

yer, yer lubber, get out of (hic) honest men's way, can't you."

Rolf saw a row brewing, and knew the sight of Hilton's money had caused it. He made another attempt to get him away.

"Want all his sugar yerself, I suppose," said one man.

"Here mates, he's goin' to 'bilk' him," said another.

"Keep back there," said Rolf, as the big man, who had stopped their way out, advanced in a threatening attitude.

"That's good for a youngster," growled the fellow.

"Keep back yerself, I'm as good as ye are."

He caught hold of Hilton, and said:

"Come and have a drink, mate."

Hilton was in that state he would have had a drink with anyone, and he was going back to the bar when Rolf said:

"Come along, Hilton. It will be better for you to go with me."

"All right," said Hilton, and tried to get away, but he had now three or four men round him. He felt a hand in his pocket, and yelled out:

"Curse the fellow, he's robbing me."

Rolf caught the man's arm as he was withdrawing his hand from Hilton's pocket, and said:

"Drop it. Leave that alone, or it'll be the worse for you."

The man caught in the act hit out at Rolf with his other arm but was not quick enough.

The next moment he lay sprawling on the sanded floor from a well directed blow between the eyes, and Rolf looked around for the next to come on.

He had not to wait long; the hulking fellow who had first interfered made straight at him.

Rolf had been no mean boxer in his college days, and as the giant came on he watched him warily. The man hit at him, and springing nimbly on one side Rolf landed him on the temple, felling him like an ox. This knock down blow disconcerted the others somewhat, and Rolf had time to drag Hilton out of the bar.

Once fairly in the street they were no longer molested.

"A nice mess you nearly got us into," said Rolf, "with your confounded dirty habits."

"Awfully sorry," moaned Hilton. "That brute was robbing me though."

"You'll get robbed pretty often if you get as drunk as this," said Rolf.

"Blest if I'll ever do it again," said Hilton, penitently.

"I hope you'll keep your promise. The best thing you can do is to go and have a good wash and go to sleep for the remainder of the day." He put Hilton in a cab and sent him to his lodgings.

Rolf then walked home, and thought he had done a fair morning's work.

Nat Smiley laughed heartily at Rolf's adventure, and said it was a good job it was no worse.

"I've met some rum customers in my time, Rolf," he said, "and I fancy Hilton will turn out another 'rum 'un' to the list. There's no harm in him, though. He's like many another good man. The drink's his master, and when 'J.H.'s.' up there's very little fear of his having a losing mount."

"I don't think there's much harm in Hilton," said Rolf.

"No more do I," said Nat. "The man's more fool to himself than anyone else."

Rolf related the interview he had with Tilly, and Nat

was of opinion she would manage the affair all right and Rolf need not trouble about it.

"If there's any difficulty you leave it to a woman, more especially if there's a man in it. She'll come out on the right side, you bet," said Nat, and Rolf hoped in this case Tilly would.

CHAPTER XIV

THE "LUCKY DIGGER" MINE.

"HOME again," said Rolf, as he and Smiley entered their neat cottage at Melrose Creek. "Town life's all very well for a change, but I'm blest if I don't think the country's better after all. How fresh and clean everything looks about the place after dirty, smoky Sydney."

"There are a few bright spots in Sydney though," replied Nat. "Still you're right, lad, there's no place like the country and no life like ours. We're free as the air we breathe. The mine we work's our own, and at Melrose Creek, although I say it, there are few more popular men than the owners of the "Lucky Digger."

"Thanks to you such is the case," said Rolf. "I often wonder, Nat, what would have become of me if I hadn't met with such a friend as you."

"Nonsense, lad. You've been the salvation of me. I couldn't have stopped here much longer without a mate like yourself."

"When shall we float the mine, Nat?" said Rolf.

"I fancy we shall strike a new vein shortly," said

Smiley, "and it's no use selling before we see what it turns out to be. We may as well have the profits as anyone else. How does The Outlaw look?"

"Splendid," said Rolf. "By Jove, he's better than we fancied him to be. Hilton has taken quite a pleasure in the colt, and looks after him like a child. I fancy that man will do us a good turn some of these days. He was awfully repentant after the little episode in Sydney."

"So he ought to have been," said Smiley. "We must keep a tight hand on him. He hasn't been drinking since he has been up here, but once let him get a taste of it, and he'll be off again in no time. The worst of such fellows is there's no trusting them."

Work continued to prosper at the "Lucky Digger" mine. They were now working three shifts of eight hours each, and the men laboured hard. They knew if all turned out well they would get a handsome share of the profits.

Several speculators had been about inspecting the country, and taking particular note of the land where the now well-known mine lay. Offers had been made to purchase it, but had all been refused. An expert from Sydney had valued it in its present state and said it was worth little short of £50,000. "If it's worth that now," said Nat, "when we strike the new vein, as I am almost sure we shall, it will be worth five times that amount, and we can keep a big share in it ourselves. Rolf, my boy, I see good times coming. We'll lead that chap Rushton such a dance he won't know whether he's on his head or his heels. I hear he's made some very bad specs of late, and it won't improve his prospects. He'd be out of it altogether if it were not for his money."

Rolf was silent. His thoughts were far away over the mountains with Tilly, and he wondered how she was battling with the adverse fate threatening to overwhelm her.

Time went on until at last the new vein talked of by Nat Smiley was struck. It was much richer than they expected, and there were great rejoicings in the camp in consequence. It was indeed a lucky digger's mine. No such silver claim had ever been discovered in N.S. Wales before. The place seemed to teem with it. The news reached Sydney, and there was a rush for the spoil. All sorts of people flocked to Melrose Creek. But most of the best land was taken up, and chagrined and disappointed they had to return to their forsaken homes. Nat and Rolf had taken the precaution to secure some acres of the land round their claim, and that they had acted wisely was proved by the numerous offers received to buy at a great profit. But they were determined not to sell.

The rejoicings at the Creek were genuine, for no men could be more popular than the owners of the "Lucky Digger" mine.

But there was a tinge of regret in the disappointment, for it was generally supposed they would sell out and make tracks for more civilised parts.

In time the mine was placed on the market for £250,000, and the amount was subscribed twice over. Nat and Rolf were each to retain a thousand shares at £10 each and divide the rest between them.

What a change from comparative poverty to wealth. Here was Rolf Standish a few short months before actually without a shilling in his pocket, and almost starving in the streets of Sydney. Now he was a far richer man than the benefactor who had helped him.

Rolf's first thought was to at once offer to lend Briscoe the necessary money to take up Rushton's mortgages on Yeronga. He would have gone straight away to Sydney and done so at once when all was settled had not Nat detained him.

"I'd let Mr. Rushton have a little more rope," said Nat. "Let him sell Yeronga, and you buy it. Times are terribly bad now, and I don't fancy the place will fetch as much as he has advanced on it."

"But it would break old Briscoe's heart to have the place sold," said Rolf. "I want to save him that pain if I can."

"The matter must be explained to him," said Nat.

"When he thoroughly understands what a double-faced villain Rushton is I don't think he'll hesitate long. You could let Miss Briscoe know how matters are, and she could explain all to her father."

"Might not Rushton buy Yeronga?" said Rolf.

"He hasn't got the ready money to do it with. Besides, I know for a fact he wants the money he has lent Briscoe. With all his cunning Rushton has met his match, and what with racing and over speculation, he must have lost a heap of money. He'll never know whose buying the place until it's sold. Fancy the state of mind he'll be in when he finds out you've bought it. By Jove, I wouldn't let Briscoe know until after the sale, and then present him with the station. If that didn't make him think you good enough for Tilly I don't know what would."

"It would look a little like buying her," said Rolf, "wouldn't it?"

"Not a bit of it. Rushton wants her body for the price of her father's estate. You want her whole being for the sake of the love you bear her. There's no barter

about that. Man alive you're over scrupulous," said Nat.

"Here's news," said Robert Briscoe as he scanned the columns of the *Herald* one morning at breakfast. "By Jove, Tilly, what do you think?"

"What is it, dad? You look pleased. Some good news, I'm sure. Oh, I'm so glad," and she clapped her hands joyfully.

"Listen. 'The "Lucky Digger" mine. Melrose Creek was placed on the market yesterday with a capital of £250,000, and before the day closed the whole of the shares were taken up. The mine is reported to be one of the richest in the western district, and bids fair to turn out equal to Broken Hill. The owners of the mine retain 1000 shares each.' That's the mine Rolf's in," said Briscoe.

"I am glad," said Tilly, and then she blushed scarlet.

"Why, what's the matter, pet?" said Briscoe. "Oh, that's it, is it," he went on with a smile. "Well, Rolf's not half a bad sort, and I wish to Heaven he held all my blessed paper instead of that infernal Rushton."

"And why can't he, father?" said Tilly simply.

"My dear girl, you know nothing about these things," said Briscoe. "If Rolf offered Rushton twice the amount he has lent me on Yeronga he'd not take it. I know Rushton well now. He means to have his revenge. But he sha'n't wreak it on you, Tilly. He's coming to see you to-day for a final answer, is he not?"

Tilly nodded assent.

"Well, let him. I'll receive him instead," said Briscoe. "I'll let him see I've a little of the man left in me yet, although he fancies I have mortgaged my manhood with my estates. I have not many years to live, Tilly, and I

won't have your whole life made miserable for the sake of a little paltry pride."

Tilly's eyes filled with tears. She got up from her seat, went behind her father's chair, and put her soft white arms round his neck. She kissed him fondly, and then stroked his iron grey hair.

"Dad, you musn't talk like that. Why you've years of life before you yet, and besides, think what the world would be to me without you. You don't know yet how your Tilly loves you. I'd part with all I love best in the world for you, dad."

Briscoe kissed her fondly, and looking round into her tearful face, said quietly :

"Even with Rolf, my child?"

"Even with Rolf," she answered. "Have you not been all the world to me for years, dad? I have never had such a friend as well as father. You have acted the part of both parents to me. No, dad, you shall not suffer a moment's pain if I can save you, and I'll see Mr. Rushton myself when he calls."

"And what shall you say to him, Tilly?" said her father

"I hardly know, yet. I shall no doubt find words when the time comes," she said.

"It will be far better for me to cope with him," said Briscoe. "He's a dangerous man, far more so than I ever suspected, and he should never have darkened my doors. You could never marry such a man, Tilly. I will not permit it," he said.

"I shall certainly never marry him," she replied. "But let me tell him what I have to say in my own way, dad. It will make it easier for you, and may pacify him for a time."

After some argument Briscoe gave his consent to Tilly meeting Rushton.

When left to herself the girl pondered deeply over the coming interview. That afternoon she must give Rushton his answer. The news of Rolf's success had made her heart leap for joy. She knew—she felt what it meant to her. Rolf would do anything for her she was sure, and now he was rich he could save her father's estate. Why had Rolf made no sign? Why did he did he not write and tell her of his good fortune? Perhaps he would do so when the excitement was over, and he had calmly settled down again. She would trust him. She would let Rushton know he could never be more to her than an acquaintance she desired to drop, and see as little of as possible.

Punctually to time Richard Rushton arrived. He had little doubt what the answer would be. He knew Tilly well enough to know she would save her father at any cost. The news of the success of the "Lucky Digger" mine had made him rather uneasy. If Rolf knew how pressing the case was he might come to the rescue and put up the money now he had acquired wealth.

"Curse the fellow's luck," said Rushton. "He always seems to get the better of me. But I'll be even with him in this case, and Tilly too. He shall never have the chance of paying the money."

"Ah, Tilly, how well you look," he said, as the girl entered the room.

"Compliments from you are wasted, Mr. Rushton. I presume you have come to talk business."

"Not business, but about what is to me of far more importance—my life's happiness. You know, Tilly, it is my dearest wish to make you my wife," he said in his oiliest tone.

Tilly smiled sarcastically as she replied:

"We may as well come to the point. Drop your

mask before me at all events, and act like a man if you don't feel like one," she said, scornfully.

Rushton with difficulty kept his temper.

"Why will you misunderstand me?" he said. "I love you, Tilly, and have your father's consent to address you. I would do anything to gain your affections."

"Then give my father time to pay what he owes you," she said. "That is all I ask. It can be no sacrifice to a rich man like you. You will be paid in a few years, and you know it."

"I will do what you ask on one condition," he said.

"I know that condition," she replied. "You would have me sell myself body and soul to you. When you had purchased me you would treat me as a slave. I know you, Richard Rushton. There is more hate than love between us. You do not know what love is. You never will know. You are the sort of man who would delight in a woman's ruin, and smile in her face when she upbraided you. You love me!" she went on scornfully. "How can you lie so smoothly? Have you forgotten that scene at Yeronga when you accused me of the worst iniquity a woman could be guilty of? I have not forgotten it, if you have."

"Very well said, Miss Briscoe," he replied. "As we appear to understand each other, perhaps you will give me your answer. I am nearly tired of waiting."

"You shall have your answer," she replied. "You have asked me to be your wife. From some men I should consider such a request an honour, although I might not be able to grant it. From you it is an insult. You say my father's ruin rests with you, and that it depends upon me to avert it. Be that as it may, you will find you have overshot the mark. My

father will never consent to hand his daughter over to a living death, such as any woman must endure with you. Wealth you may have, position you may have, but your heart is black as night, and your conscience makes a coward of you. Once for all, Richard Rushton, I refuse to be your wife. Under no circumstances could I be induced to change my mind."

Rushton almost growled with rage. He had hardly expected such an answer, and least of all accompanied by such a torrent of hard words, each of which went home to his coward heart.

"That is your answer, Miss Briscoe," he said, when his wrath had subsided a little to enable him to speak calmly. "You know not what you have done. Tomorrow the bailiffs will be in this house, and Yeronga will be up for sale. All your father has is mine, and I will have you yet. You shall never marry that sneaking hound Rolf——"

"Stop," said Tilly, "you have said enough. Rolf Standish——" she saw the slip she had made, and turned white as death. Had she betrayed the man she loved? What could it mean? Could Rushton make any use of it? Then she looked at the man before her, and saw what she had little expected.

Richard Rushton had turned livid. He grasped at a chair for support. He looked at Tilly with dilated eyes. The change in the man was awful. All the bully had gone out of him, and an arrant coward stood in his place.

"What's that you said?" he gasped. "What name did you say?"

Tilly never spoke. She had said the name unwittingly once. Tortures would not drag it from her again.

"Say it again, by God, or I'll—" and he lifted his clenched fist.

Tilly did not quail. "Hit me," she said. "It is what I might expect from such a man as you. But beware the consequences ; my father is in the house."

"The name you mentioned is one I hate," he said. "I hate it more than any name on earth. If your lover is Rolf Standish, let him beware."

Tilly was becoming alarmed. Had she known all, there would have been little cause for fear, but she did not. It was of Rolf she thought, not herself. And yet why had Rushton looked terror-stricken when that name was mentioned? The fear must have been for himself.

"Miss Briscoe, I have made a discovery," he said. "I will leave you now. To-morrow you may tell your father Yeronga will be for sale. I will not turn you out of house and home yet. That time may come. I wish you joy of your lover. You may find when it is too late who and what he is. Marry him by all means. I have no doubt he will make a loving husband. Some men leave wives behind them when they come to Australia. Look before you leap. I advise you as a friend. Good day, Miss Briscoe."

Rushton went out of the house, and as the door banged Tilly sat down and burst into tears.

"Oh! Rolf, Rolf, it can't be true?" she said. "I'll never believe it. But what hold can that man have over him? He looked terrified. There's some mystery here, but I'll trust Rolf, come what may, and never ask him a question about it. I'll not even mention I let his real name slip.

Briscoe heard what his daughter had done with a sigh of resignation, and now it was over he felt his courage

renewed. He'd plenty of pluck left yet, he was not bankrupt in that at all events. It would be a sore trial to let Yeronga go, but that was better than allowing Tilly to marry such a man as Rushton.

At heart Robert Briscoe had an idea. Rolf Smith, as he knew him to be, could come to the rescue. He felt Rolf was a man to be trusted in time of need, but it went against the grain with the Hon Robert to ask help from a man, least of all from Rolf.

"I'll let things take their course," he said. "I wonder if Rolf will come up to the scratch. It's odds on he does. He's such a real good sort."

CHAPTER XV

UNPLEASANT REFLECTIONS.

WHEN Richard Rushton left Briscoe's house after the interview with Tilly he was in no pleasant frame of mind. He had gone there fully expecting her answer to be in the affirmative. He had his doubts, but he never expected such a sudden and unexpected refusal, combined with a bitter attack upon himself. He had heard some unpleasant truths, and Tilly's sarcasms rankled deeply in his heart.

But what caused him more uneasiness than anything else was the mention of Rolf's real name.

"Standish," he thought. "Great Heavens, what memories that name brings back to me."

He went home and collected his thoughts. So Rolf

Smith was Rolf Standish. That accounted for him being struck with the likeness to a face that often haunted him in his dreams, and caused him unpleasant reflections when awake. As he sat buried in deep thought, his face assumed a half defiant, half terrified expression, but there was bitter remorse in it. Rushton was a thoroughly selfish man. What troubled him now was fears for his own personal safety if Rolf Standish should find out what he had done and who he was.

When in England Rushton had been pampered and petted by an over indulgent father. He had no mother, which may be some slight excuse for his conduct. A mother's watchful care will often keep an erring lad straight when the father's sterner influence fails. The thoughts of that kind, fond patient soul bearing her life's burden without a murmur, and smoothing her children's path in the world, often keeps away wicked temptations even when the object of her solicitude is far away in distant lands.

Rushton had always had money. He never knew what it was to want it. He had plenty of invitations, and not being a bad-looking fellow was popular with the ladies.

"What strange fate led me to her home," he thought. "I had half a mind not to go when I received the invitation. How little people knew the hand the old pater had in the downfall of the Colliers and the ruin of the Standishes. I must take credit for endeavouring to persuade him not to press Colliers home at the time he did. But it mattered little. The crash would have come. Had the governor not stepped in when he did he would have lost a fortune, instead of nearly doubling his own. Every man for himself in this world. Fate worked for me, however, and I went. How lovely she

looked. What man would not have done as I did. Then when she played a fair golden-haired boy in those theatricals. Shall I ever forget it? That velvet suit. What a figure. Fit for a Venus. Then came the opportunity. Poor, and in some measure dependent, her proud nature revolted at the thought. I saw how the land lay. She could not bear to think she had to look to others for her daily bread.

“That night in the conservatory. The scent of flowers filled the air with a sensuous perfume. We were quite alone. What a night that was. How she tempted me. Did I tempt her? Well, perhaps I did. D—— it I’d do it again. I’d give half my life for a few more scenes such as those. We sat close together on a seat encased in a shady wall surrounded with huge ferns. Not a sound to break the stillness. And then I told her how I loved her. I wonder if she ever loved me. Sometimes I fancy she did not, but merely accepted me out of a sheer wish to have a home of her own, and be mistress in her own house.

“I tempted her, yes, I must have done. I offered to marry her if she would elope with me. I gave excuses that the marriage must be kept secret for a time. When she pressed me to tell her I told her of the hand my father had in the Collier failure, and explained how impossible it would be for him at present to recognise her as his daughter.

“I had a hard fight, but eventually won. We eloped to London. Shall I ever forget that first sweet week of bliss. It was all sunshine. She never thought of the shadow then. I never gave her time to think. I whirled her from one place of pleasure to another, and she seemed delighted. The presents I bought that girl.

Lord, I must have spent hundreds on her, but she was worth it.

"Then the trouble came. At the end of a week she commenced to pester me about our marriage. I made excuse after excuse. She at last saw what I meant to do, and her fury was awful. What a fearful temper she had. My life was miserable with her. At last she went to my father. What a scene there must have been. The upshot of it was the old man had her put out of the house—Heaven forgive him—and he read me such a lecture that I asked for leave of absence. I should not have left London, but that girl hunted me down. Wherever I went she managed to follow me. At last I gave her the slip, leaving her a few pounds behind. Perhaps I ought to have left her more. Once on board ship for this cursed country I felt free. The old man came down handsomely and has done since I have been here, and I've made a bit of a pile by speculations. I'm getting to like the life now, or I'd have gone home again long ago.

"What the deuce has become of her, I wonder. And she must have been Rolf Standish's sister," and Rushton shivered. "If the fellow only knew he'd kill me. I wonder if he knows she has gone to the bad. No, he can't. He's the sort of fellow such a thing would haunt, and he'd show it in his face. If ever he does make the unpleasant discovery, and connect me with it, I shall have to make tracks out of his reach. There's not much fear of that. If his friends at home have written him, it is highly probable they have said nothing about it. Standish. That hateful name. The people always seem to be mixed up with our family in a most unpleasant way. No wonder the fellow took an instinctive dislike to me. He said he'd a heavy account to settle with me,

and by Jove he has if he only knew it. Then there's that other affair I have on here, I must get rid of her somehow. Her dear husband is unaware I am the disturber of his peace or he might also make it hot for me." It was very evident Richard Rushton had quite enough on his hands to make him feel uncomfortable. A ruined girl in England and a dishonoured wife in Australia was a record even a man of Rushton's villainous frame of mind might have shuddered at.

"Now, about this Briscoe affair," he went on. "I must have Yeronga sold. I want the ready money, there's no doubt about that. It ought to fetch the amount of the mortgage, even in these bad times. I've lent the old fool more on it than I ought to have done, thinking he would urge on my marriage with Tilly. D—— that girl, if I could only make her suffer as I did the other one. Worse. Hang it, I don't know what is bad enough for her. At any rate, Miss Tilly, I can put a spoke in your wheel in society, anyway. A little rumour can soon be spread about that night scene at Yeronga. There'll be only too many pious matrons with ugly daughters ready to believe it. Then a neat paragraph in one or two social columns of the papers will make the Hon. Robert writhe, I fancy. Oh! yes, I can work out a nice little scheme of revenge, my dear girl. But will she care? Of course she will. When her reputation's assailed she must care. Who'll buy Yeronga, I wonder?"

A sudden thought seemed to strike him.

"Perhaps Rolf Standish has lent her the money to pay off the mortgage. That must be the case, or she'd never have been so bold about it. If he has, more fool he. She's dear at the price, and I shall get the money, which I want badly enough."

Rushton dropped in at Her Majesty's Theatre that

night. He met several choice companions. As he stood talking with the manager during one of the intervals that worthy said :

"By the bye, Mr. Rushton, we've a new star coming out. She's reported to be a real gem of the first water. Not been long on the stage, but took the whole place by storm. A real beauty, I believe."

"What's her name?" said Rushton.

"Maude Bradley," was the reply. "Rather a common name for an actress, more especially in her line of business."

"What's her line?" said Rushton.

"Oh! comic opera and burlesque."

Rushton laughed as he said, "What, going to have comic opera and burlesque in the home of the drama at Her Majesty's?"

The manager waved his hand deprecatingly. "We must have a change sometimes," he said, "and I hope it will be a case of extremes, making both ends meet. She'll cost a lot of money. I hear she's a bit in your line, Mr. Rushton."

"A shade off colour, I suppose. Well, so much the better. She's bound to be a draw if anything shady is connected with her. The more her morality is questioned the more attractive she'll be to the general public. How the dear ladies do love scandal."

"She'll arrive in about four or five months," said the manager.

"What do you open in with her?" said Rushton.

"Not decided yet. The governor hardly knows which of her pieces is the best. We must have a look at her before we definitely settle. She'll be here a few weeks before she appears," said the manager.

"Good news at all events," said Rushton. "It's a deuce of a while since I saw a pretty divinity out here in tights. Will remind a fellow of the good old days of the Gaiety or the Alhambra, I suppose."

Next day Rushton had Yeronga announced for sale, and at the commencement of the following week the auction took place.

When Nat Smiley and Rolf saw the announcement they had a consultation, and it was eventually decided that Hilton, who was respectable enough when well dressed and sober, should go to Sydney and bid for it on behalf of Rolf. He would not be known, and he could give a note from Rolf to the auctioneer beforehand.

"I know Mr. Knocker," said Nat, "he'll not let the cat out of the bag, and he'll take old Hilton's bids without a murmur."

So Hilton went to Sydney with strict injunctions from Nat to keep sober. Rolf went with him, but meant to keep quiet until after the sale.

Tilly had been in a state of expectancy ever since her interview with Rushton. She still hoped Rolf would make some sign, and when he did not her heart almost failed her. Still she felt he would come to the rescue when he heard of her troubles.

The Hon. Robert took matters much better than could have been expected. He swore a good deal when he saw the advertisement of Yeronga for sale in the papers. He kept out of the way of his numerous acquaintances, and said "he'd lie by until the affair was over."

"It's much better to part with Yeronga than let you marry that scoundrel, Rushton. How on earth I could have ever thought of it I don't know, Tilly."

"Never mind, dad. We may be able to buy the old

place back some day. You're the best old dad ever lived, isn't he, Rowy?"

"Mr. Briscoe is a true gentleman, and can bear reverses of fortune," said Miss Rowton, sadly.

"And so can true-hearted women," said Briscoe and Miss Rowton knew what he meant, and gave him a glance of kindly sympathy.

The day of the sale arrived and Briscoe was irritable.

"I'd like to go down and see who buys the old place," he said.

"You're better at home, dad," said Tilly; "stay with me. I've sent a little note to Mr. Knocker to wire us who has got it as soon as the sale is over."

"You thoughtful girl. Well, I'll stay at home," said Briscoe with a sigh.

Yeronga Station was such a well-known property, and Briscoe such a popular man, that the sale attracted a large attendance of speculators.

Richard Rushton's character was known, and he was looked at with no favourable eyes as he entered the room.

Among the crowd stood Hilton, looking quite respectable, and sober as a judge. He meant to have a little spree afterwards, but business first.

The auctioneer expatiated upon the merits of Yeronga Station, until some of the audience became impatient.

He finally wound up his peroration by stating that the property must be sold as the mortgagee had foreclosed.

Bids were slow at first. The estate was started at £10,000, at which the auctioneer smiled and hinted that the bidder must have been in the habit of buying second-hand pianos. "It's not the price of the stock," he said,

and this caused someone to exclaim, "Draw it mild, Knocker."

When the bids had reached £15,000, Hilton put in his spoke and raised it a thousand.

He at once became the object of general attention. Rushton looked at the man, and asked the auctioneer if the bid was right. The reply being satisfactory he waited the issue of events.

At £18,000, Rushton gave a bid of £20,000, and there was a halt.

"Five hundred," said Hilton.

Gradually it went up until the bid against Hilton was £25,000.

He hesitated, and then said, "I'll give £26,000 and no more. I've done."

There was a slight cheer, but many men present knew that five years ago the property would have fetched nearer £50,000, and they thought it hard lines on Briscoe.

The hammer fell.

"What name?" said Knocker.

"David Hilton."

"For yourself, sir."

"No, for Mr. Rolf Smith of the 'Lucky Digger Mine,'" said Hilton.

"Damnation!" yelled Rushton.

"Eh! Beg pardon," said Knocker, who hated the sight of Rushton.

"You were in this," said Rushton, savagely.

"Now look here, don't you bully me, Mr. Rushton. One man's bid is as good as another's."

"I'll be even with you for this piece of work," said Rushton, as he went out of the room beside himself with rage.

Knocker laughed as he said to a messenger, "Here, take this wire to the office, quick."

Tilly and the Hon. Robert were anxiously waiting the news.

"Wonder who'll get the old place," sighed Briscoe.

"Here's the lad, dad. We shall soon know," said Tilly.

She opened it eagerly and read the following words :

"Rolf Smith, of 'Lucky Digger Mine,' bought Yeronga, £26,000."

Tilly fairly danced round the room for joy. She hugged her father, and cried and laughed alternately.

"What's the matter, are you mad, Tilly?" said the astonished Briscoe.

"Read it, dad. Read it," and she gave him the telegram.

Briscoe could hardly believe his eyes. At last he said :

"Tilly, he's a noble fellow. You know why he has done that."

Tilly blushed, and hid her face on her father's shoulder.

"Somehow I felt along he would," she said.

"Heaven bless him," said Briscoe. "I'd like to see Rushton's face now," he laughed.

"I wouldn't, it's bad enough at the best of times," said Tilly.

Rolf called that evening. What his reception was can be better imagined than described.

"Take her, lad," said Briscoe. "She's the best girl ever born, and you've proved the sort of stuff you're made of. She'll be a bonny bride, and Yeronga will suit you both well. Gad, and to think how that scoundrel, Rushton, made me treat you."

"That's all forgotten," said Rolf. "I've had great luck, and there is more in store. Tilly shall have Yeronga, and here's something for you, Mr. Briscoe, if you will accept it."

"What's this," said Briscoe. "Five hundred shares in the 'Lucky Digger Mine.' Why, it means a fortune. They're going up daily. No, I can't accept it lad."

"You must, sir. It is a slight amount for me to give," said Rolf.

And so the change came about. Instead of the Hon. Robert Briscoe assisting the penniless Rolf Standish, they had changed places.

When Tilly had retired, Rolf told Briscoe his history, and said that in future he would take the name of Standish.

"Right, my lad. You've not disgraced it, and I'm proud of you. You must write for your sister to come out. What a happy family we shall be," said Briscoe.

"I will," said Rolf.

Alas! He little knew where that sister was or under what circumstances he should next meet her face to face.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SCENE IN LONDON.

IT may be as well, in order to place the reader in a position to exactly understand the future actions of the characters in this story, to take a glance at certain scenes being enacted in London at the time Rolf Standish purchased Yeronga,

It was a brilliant morning in May, and the London season was almost in full swing. London in May is very different to London in November. No fogs, but a beautiful balmy breeze with just enough sun to touch up all the surroundings with a light and airy tint. The budding trees, the parks looking gay with the colours of spring, and the vast city throbbing and trembling once more with the movements of London society. London in May is an enjoyable place, and the denizens of that vast mass of buildings know how to appreciate it. The tradesmen smile and talk over the prospects of the coming season. Their lawful prey, the swells of society, are in town again, and the golden harvest will be reaped before the crack of the guns denotes that pheasant-slaughtering has commenced, and the country will afford more attractions than the town.

Rotten Row was thronged with a mass of carriages. Where in the world can such a grand display of horses and turnouts be found? The side walks were lined with spectators watching the gay scene and recognising their friends as they drove or rode by.

Beautiful women dressed in the height of fashion. Blood of ancient lineage coursing through their veins, dating back from the Conquest. Noble looking, many of them, others listless and lazy, lying back amidst soft delicate cushions, the very picture of aristocratic indolence. Dukes and duchesses, statesmen, and country squires all mingled together in one vast throng.

Royalty, represented by His Royal Highness and his fair princess, the cynosure of all eyes. A brilliant sight indeed. Wealth untold. Fabulous sums of money spent every year on many a show in the Row.

What causes a stir among the loungers? A handsome pair of bays, their harness with its golden mount-

ings flashing in the sunlight. A magnificent carriage, the picture of ease, elegance and comfort, not another one to match it in the Row. An equipage of which a prince might have been proud.

Within the carriage an occupant in every way worthy of it as far as beauty was concerned. A fine handsome woman, young, and with a lovely face. Her flashing eyes shaded by long dark lashes. Her cheeks pink with the glow of health. Her dress a marvel of the skill of Worth. She was alone with the exception of two small white terriers seated opposite to her. She gazed around with an air of supreme indifference, and acknowledged the numerous greetings of her male acquaintances in the most off-hand manner. She seemed to have very few friends of her own sex. Perhaps she was too lovely for them, and their envy, hatred, and malice, were aroused against her.

A lovely woman has seldom many staunch friends of her own sex.

A murmur of admiration could be heard as she drove slowly down the Row.

"Who is she?" whispered the strangers. "Looks more beautiful than ever," said the swells. "By Jove, I wonder where it all comes from," says the Duke of —, with perhaps an inward feeling that some of his cash through his son and heir finds its way into her rapacious purse.

Young Lord Studley, who has been travelling for a couple of years with his tutor, and is now out of leading strings, gazed at her rapturously.

He asks his guide and mentor, Captain Slowton, who "that Venus is."

"Ah, my dear boy, you must have been hidden in the deserts of Egypt or burying your young head in a

Jerusalem temple if you don't know the most beautiful woman in London."

"You know, Slowton, I have been away for a couple of years," he answered, "and have missed a good deal of the London world."

"You're in a very fair way to find out all about it now, my boy. I guess you must have lost a 'monkey' last night. Gad, I wonder what the Duke will say. He gave you into my charge, but upon my word there's no stopping you." And considering that Captain Slowton had pocketed half the sum in question there did not seem much chance of stopping him.

"The Duke can pay. I haven't cost him much yet," said Lord Studley. "But who the deuce is the girl?"

"That's Maude Bradley, the best figure on the London stage, and perhaps the most beautiful woman."

"That's Maude Bradley, is it?" said Lord Studley. "By Jove, she's a beauty, and they say she's as good as she's beautiful. Is that not so, Slowton?"

"My dear fellow, you really must not ask me conundrums. Maude is an actress. She possesses no special merit except her looks, her figure, and her superb costumes. She shows more of her divine form on the boards occasionally than may be discreet, and Trollit, her manager, has had a hint once or twice from the Lord Chamberlain that he cannot permit matters to go any further. Considering they couldn't go much further unless she appeared as Venus is reported to have done to Adonis, the caution was almost needless. She may be virtuous. I don't say she isn't, but it don't look much like it."

"A face like that and to be so utterly lost as to exhibit her charms at so much per head, it's monstrous, old fellow. Can an angel like that fall so low?"

"Here, stop it, Studley. Hang it all, man, where have you got all this nonsense crammed into your head? Don't you know that burlesque is in the ascendant and patronised by royalty. Didn't the divine Bradley dance before H.R.H. only last night, and received no less than three recalls. Tut man, it's the fashion. We'll go and see her to-night. I've a couple of stalls in a good position."

"All right, I'm willing," said Studley. "Do you know her, Slowton?"

"I've been introduced, but then I'm too small a fish for the lovely Maude to take much notice of. I've only a soul, and not much cash. She likes gold fish, and the more the merrier. I daresay I can get you an invite to one of her little supper parties. By Jove, they're the best things out," said the captain, as he chuckled over the remembrance of sundry bottles of sparkling he had imbibed at the fair Bradley's dovecot.

"Just suit me," said Lord Studley. "I'd like to know her immensely. Must be out of the common. I hear she's only been on the stage a couple of years."

"She was well trained beforehand," said Slowton. "She hit the public on her first appearance."

"What does she play to-night?" said Lord Studley.

"A new burlesque, only been on a week. It's real good. It's called '*Love's Own Land*.' She plays the Goddess of Love. Quite in your style. A regular classical affair, more especially about the draperies."

"That's settled, we'll go," said Lord Studley.

Meanwhile the object of their remarks had driven along the Row, and the sensation she caused must have been quite enough even for her ambition, which men said was insatiable, and women said was to obtain to

the pinnacle of wickedness. A couple of turns more and then she drove home.

Her carriage pulled up at a beautiful residence in South Kensington. She went inside, and her maid divested of her wraps.

A splendid house. Her boudoir was in excellent taste. Nothing loud or unbecoming about it. Everything rich and costly, but quiet. Miniatures costing large sums, small pictures worth almost their weight in gold. Jewelled toilet requisites, choice bits of porcelain and old china. Fans an Empress might have envied. A soft light in the room. Heavy dark royal blue curtains, slashed with cream satin, showing a strong contrast on the deep pile of the velvet.

She signed her maid away, and then sank into a luxurious chair.

What was that? A deep sigh from such a favourite of fortune. Maude Bradley, with half of the fashionable London world at her feet, could she utter such an almost moan of pain? She sat for nearly an hour and did not stir.

"Another. Yes, yet another. He will come. I saw it in his eyes. Such a youth, too, and that odious toady Slowton, with him. I wonder who he is. What a handsome youth. Noble. He must be. Well, I won't have his soul on my conscience, anyway." From which it will be seen that if Lord Studley had taken a good look at Maude Bradley, she had not passed him by without a glance.

"What a life this is. When I think of the old happy days before ruin came upon us, I feel as though I should die with shame. Poor Rolfe. Where is he now. Oh! had he stayed at home how different it all would have been. Now I can never look him in the face again. He

may be dead. No, no, no! Not that. Oh, God! if I could but hear his voice and ask him to take me away from all this. But I am too deep in the mire. I have shipwrecked my honour and have lost all. Was it my fault? Was I altogether to blame?"

Her eyes flashed, and as she looked up there was a remarkable resemblance to Rolf Standish the day he towered above Rushton in his wrath on the verandah at Yeronga.

"The vile, cowardly tempter. He used me for his own wretched purpose, and then deserted me as he would any common woman. Oh, God! how that man tempted me. May a curse rest on your head, Richard Rushton, wherever you are. How he lied. Heaven, can men be so base? And his wretched father. Well, the old man's in trouble now. Borrows money from the Jews, does he. I'll make his life a misery yet. He little thinks the amount he owes me, the woman he thrust from his door. Israel Moss is a cunning fellow. He knew he could work with me to a profit in this matter, and he has. Moss shall have his just reward. I've no doubt he'll get it in the next world. How I hate those Rushtons. They were the cause of dear old father's ruin. If Rolf but knew all I know he'd hunt that hound down even to the end of the earth. What made me accept that Australian engagement? It must be fate. I may meet Rolfe there. Will he recognise me? What a struggle I had after that coward left me." She shuddered. "Shall I ever forget those weary nights in the London streets? Can there be such misery on earth? What chance gave me into the hands of such a man as Slowton! He helped me along though. But for him I should have sunk lower and lower. He did it for his own selfish ends, but it saved me from deep disgrace."

Captain Slowton evidently knew more of Maude Bradley than he confessed to Lord Studley.

"How hard I worked on the stage. Luckily I made a hit. And now!"

She rose to her full height, and glanced at herself in the mirror. No need to tell her she was beautiful, the glass reflected it too truly. She knew her power and meant still to use it.

"Men are my lawful prey. A man ruined my life, and I have vowed to war against the whole tribe. But Rolfe. Oh, my brother! What would he say to me? I know him too well. He would forgive me and bid me sin no more. Could I leave this life? I have wealth and I will have more. Let me see."

She opened a letter lying on her dressing-table.

"Another," she said, as she stooped and picked up a bank-note. "Only a hundred this time. Your getting mean, Sir Henry. I must call you to order. He'll make it a thousand sooner than receive his *congé*."

"Presents. I'm sick of them. I must have more money. Moss says Old Rushton wants another five thousand to-morrow. He must have it, and I must lend it him. Nearly £20,000 now. Moss says the securities are worth more than treble that, and bargains for his share. He shall have it. Let me have revenge, that will suffice. How to get the ready money."

A thought seemed to strike her. "No, I'll not do it. He's a mere lad. Wonder who that handsome youngster was with the Captain. Whoever he be, I'll not harm him. He'll be fleeced enough if he has Slowton for a mentor. Heigho, but I must have a cup of tea and go to the theatre."

The Alcazar Theatre was filled with a fashionable audience, and Lord Studley and Captain Slowton

occupied seats in the stalls, near the stage. It was not a large theatre, but replete with every comfort, and the new burlesque, *Loves own Land* had filled the house nightly. Maude Bradley was the idol of the Alcazar, and she knew her worth, as the manager could have told when "treasury" came round.

It is needless to describe the burlesque. It was one of those nonsensical pieces written for spectacular show, the dialogue being a mere secondary consideration.

But when Maude Bradley appeared as Love, it fairly took Lord Studley's breath away, and the house gave a murmur of admiration and excitement. Her lovely form was clad in a voluptuous robe of white velvet, with a gold band round the waist, and a crown upon her head from which flashed the myriad light of seven diamonds. Her splendid bust was such as a sculptor might have envied. Her movements were graceful, and the song she sang filled her hearers with dreams of love.

In the second act she came on to the stage in the costume of the ballet, and over this a white gauze was thrown. She danced a peculiar fantastic movement, and at its conclusion threw off the veil of gauze and stood erect, her beautiful hair floating around her. The effect was electrical. Cheer after cheer greeted her. She danced again, and this time with more rapid movements. Finally she leapt into the arms of a huge giant who clasped her to his bosom, and bending, kissed her lips.

"How lovely she is," said Studley, almost beside himself.

"Would you like to see her to-night?" said Captain Slowton.

"Can it be done?"

"Yes."

"Then it shall be done," said Lord Studley in a determined manner.

The third act was short, but gave Maude Bradley an opportunity to appear in still another ravishing costume.

Crowned the Queen of Love she sat on a marble throne surrounded by a group of lovely damsels.

Worshippers came from all quarters of the globe and fell down before her. They loaded her with presents and sought her favour. To each suitor she presented one of her maidens. None seemed to please the Queen of Love. Then a dance began, and the magnificent ballet honoured their Queen as she sat on the throne.

A sudden roar of cannon. The sound of trumpets. Then a heavy march as of armed men, and the dancers stood motionless.

Tramp. Tramp. On came a host of warriors clad in a variety of skins, and their long locks flowing over their necks. Wild barbarians. A rude car drawn by two white elephants with tigers on either side of it. Seated in it a tall powerful man. A Hercules in form.

He had come to seize the Queen of Love and her maidens for his barbarian crew. Little he knew the power of Love.

The Queen fixed her dazzling eyes upon him. She stood erect and loosened her gorgeous cloak. It fell in folds at her feet. There she stood in shining armour of gold, a magnificent amazon. She waved her sceptre and all the maidens cast aside their garments and stood before the warriors in silver armour.

"Now, canst thou conquer Love," said the Queen, proudly.

The barbarian chief bowed his head. He descended from his chariot and knelt at her feet. The former suitors for her hand stood aghast.

Trumpets sounded as the final grand ballet commenced, the curtain descending with the barbarian king lying at the feet of Love.

"Magnificent!" said Lord Studley.

A note was put into Captain Slowton's hand. He opened it and read it, then turning to his companion said :

"You're in luck, Studley, my boy. She will sup alone with us, to-night."

Lord Studley's eyes gleamed with pleasure and pride.

They entered his cab and drove direct to Maude Bradley's house. The Queen of Love was awaiting them.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE QUEEN OF LOVE.

WHEN Captain Slowton intimated to Maude Bradley that young Lord Studley was desirous of making her acquaintance, she felt half inclined to refuse to see him.

She had, however, thought the matter over, the result being that she decided to invite the pair to supper and have no other guests present.

She felt certain scruples in the matter, now she knew the handsome young fellow she had seen with Slowton was Lord Studley, heir to the Dukedom of ———. Maude was ambitious, and she well knew the advantages of acquaintance on terms of familiarity with such a distinguished personage.

She hurried home from the theatre as quickly as her

horses could take her, and dressed in one of her most bewitching yet remarkably simple costumes. No one, to look at her now, would have thought a few hours before she had been exposing her charms to the gaze of a house full of people.

She looked modest enough, and had discarded nearly all her jewelry.

"I wonder what he'll think of me off the stage," she thought. "He'll find me rather different to what he expected after seeing me on it. Bah! how I hate those costumes Trollit insists on me wearing. But they draw the people, there can be no doubt about that. I must put it down to the fault of the age I live in, and not to myself."

When Lord Studley and the Captain arrived, their fair hostess did not keep them long in suspense. She entered the room with such a modest ladylike grace that young Studley was quite surprised, and showed his astonishment pretty plainly in his face.

Maude saw it in a moment, and it pleased her.

"Good night, Captain Slowton, I am glad to see you," she said.

He introduced her to Lord Studley, and as he took her hand a tremor shot through his frame. How soft and warm it felt, and what a tiny hand it was. He could not forbear a gentle pressure, but it met with no response.

The supper was served in the best possible style. No lavish profusion, but merely what might have been expected had two friends accidentally dropped in.

"You see I have made no special preparations for you," said Maude. "I did not have sufficient notice of your intention to honour my humble abode, Lord Studley."

"I am exceedingly glad you had not," he said. "I came here to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance, not merely to eat your supper."

"And why did you desire to make my acquaintance?" she asked.

"Because I had heard so much about you. I saw you in the Row, and I was not at all surprised at your great success upon the stage. I have been travelling for two years, and I can safely say, without flattery, Miss Bradley, that you are the loveliest woman I think I ever saw."

Captain Slowton laughed as he said :

"Bravo, Studley. You have learnt the Continental art of flattery well. I must congratulate you."

"It is no flattery. I said so before, and I mean it. Miss Bradley will accept my assurance," said Lord Studley.

"Certainly I will," she said, "but it is too good of you to say so. You must have seen some very beautiful women in your travels."

"I have," he replied. "Italians, Spaniards, Russians, and Greeks, and some lovely Jewesses. But although beautiful in their way, I prefer the loveliness of the true English woman. It cannot be surpassed. There is a something wanting in all the other races. What it is I do not know, but I fail to find it. Perhaps it may be a lack of sympathy, and a tendency to love fiercely and hate bitterly."

"And cannot an English woman hate fiercely and love deeply?" said Maude, with flashing eyes. Lord Studley looked at her with surprise, and she actually blushed.

"Some of them could, I have no doubt. But when an English woman hates fiercely she must have suffered

some grievous wrong. It is not her nature to hate. She must be forced to do so. Am I not right?" he said.

"I think you are perfectly right," said Maude, slowly. "There must be a deep wound to make a woman hate. I could kill a man if he wronged me," she said, vehemently.

Again Studley looked at her, and said quietly, "I believe you. And yet if I am not mistaken you are a woman born to love, rather than to hate. Why do you play in such pieces as '*Love's Own Land?*'" he asked quickly.

"Is not she the goddess of burlesque?" said Slowton. "What would the Alcazarites do without her. It's a lucky thing Trollit's not here, or he'd loose his temper with you, my boy."

Maude took no notice of Captain Slowton's remark, but addressing Lord Studley, said :

"I play in such pieces, Lord Studley, because I have to earn my living. I can assure you I have no taste for such displays. But it gives me power and wealth, and what's more ——," and she hesitated.

"Please continue," said Lord Studley. "What else does it give you?"

"Revenge," she said.

"I thought so," he half muttered, but she heard him.

"Why did you think so?" she said, quickly.

"Because I am a good judge of character, and yours is an interesting one to study. I should like to learn more of it, Miss Bradley, if I may," he said.

"I shall be most happy to let you study me at any time," she said, smiling.

Captain Slowton hardly relished the drift of the

conversation, so paid particular attention to his supper.

The champagne passed around. Lord Studley drank but little.

At last he rose to go, and as he did so put the glass to his lips, and said with a bow, "I drink to the Queen of Love."

Maude Bradley acknowledged the compliment.

"Have a hand at cards," said Captain Slowton. "I have no doubt our fair hostess will join us."

"I must decline, Captain Slowton," she said. "I am not over well and need rest. Good night, gentlemen."

"May I call," said Lord Studley, as he shook hands with her.

"As your Lordship pleases, I shall be most happy to receive you," she said.

"To-morrow at noon?" he said.

"So soon."

"It cannot be too soon. I wish to have a few words in confidence with you," he said. Maude Bradley looked at him. Was he, too, like all the rest.

He saw the look and what it implied, and said slowly :

"You are mistaken, Miss Bradley. I will call at noon and you shall judge for yourself."

In another moment he was gone.

Maude Bradley sat in her room in deep thought. She felt interested in Lord Studley. Why, she could hardly tell. He treated her with the utmost courtesy. "I wonder what made him ask why I play in such pieces as *Love's Own Land*. He must think I'm utterly worthless to do it. When will this life end? I'm sick of it. I wish I was sailing for Australia to-morrow. I might lose a little of this London life."

Punctually to time, Lord Studley appeared next day

at the fashionable actress's house. He was graciously received by Maude Bradley in her own private room. As he entered his practised eye took in at a glance the numerous evidences of good taste and culture displayed. "This woman has not been born to lead such a life," he thought. "I should like to know her history. She must come of some good old family. I have heard of such affairs."

Dangerous feelings for a young rich nobleman to entertain towards a woman of Maude Bradley's beauty and position.

She gave him a cordial welcome, and he expressed pleasure at seeing her.

After a few commonplace observations, he said :

"Miss Bradley, you strangely interest me. Some dark secret overshadows your life, I feel sure of it. Ah ! I have given you pain," he said, as he saw her features contract, and a dangerous look come into her eyes.

"My past is my own, Lord Studley," she said. "And I am not likely to tell the history to any one, much less to a perfect stranger. Whatever it may have been, I try to forget it in the present. I have the world at my feet. I am courted and fêted, and my life is a daily round of pleasure."

"Which you do not enjoy," said Lord Studley, quietly.

"Why should I not enjoy it ? I have everything I want, and the only thing I occasionally run short of is money, but I manage to get that before matters become serious," she said.

"Do you want money now ?" he asked.

Maude Bradley could hardly understand the young man. He was different from the general run of her admirers, for she felt he was one, or soon would be. She

had an inward feeling that she would like to retain his respect.

"If I wanted money now I should not be likely to tell you, Lord Studley," she said.

"And why not? I am rich, and money to me is of very little worth. I am not an extravagant man."

"If you are much with Captain Slowton you will soon spend a good deal of money," she said.

"Perhaps. But I know Slowton and he will only go as far as I wish," said Lord Studley.

"I am glad of that," said Maude.

"Come, let me help you, I know you are in trouble," he said.

"Lord Studley, I will be candid with you. I do want money, but for a purpose you little imagine. I want £5,000 to-day, and must have it."

"A large sum," he said. "You shall have it on one condition, and I will trust you to use it in some good cause."

"And your condition?" she asked scornfully.

"That you will never appear on the stage again in such a costume as the one in the second act of *Love's Own Land*," he said.

Maude Bradley hid her face in her hands. The answer was so different from what she had expected. After all he was unlike other men.

"I must carry out the conditions of the piece," she said, at last, excusingly. "Trollit would never consent to omit that effect."

"He will, if I ask him," said Lord Studley.

"And you would do that for me?" said Maude Bradley.

"Yes, and more. Listen to me. I once loved a beautiful girl, madly, fondly. I am but young, but I

have suffered. She returned my affections as ardently as I gave her mine. She came of a noble Italian family. She was very like you. When the terrible cholera scourge raged at Naples she was taken from me. I have never forgotten her, I never shall. Let me help you for her sake. I want to make you better than you are. You were not born for such scenes as this. If you must act, learn to become the queen of a home, not a queen of burlesque. I will help you. Promise me you will not appear in that dress again."

"I promise," said Maude, looking at him with earnest eyes. "You will see the manager about it. Oh, Lord Studley, you have given me a cruel blow. You have shown me what I am. How can I earn your esteem?"

"Easily," he said. "By keeping your promise."

Lord Studley was indeed very much unlike the young men of his day.

"You shall have the money," he said.

"No, no, no, I could not touch it," said Maude. "Indeed I could not. I will not take a penny from you."

Then she told him what she had wanted it for.

He asked her kindly questions and learned the secret of her life.

"My poor Maude," he said, and laid a hand, white and small as her own, upon her head. "You are, indeed, more sinned against than sinning. If I could find that man I'd shoot him like a dog. I'd make him fight me, and take the consequences. And the father. He's as bad as the son. You shall have your revenge, Maude. It is just." He sat down at her escritoire, and commenced to write. "Send that to Rothschild's," he said, as he handed her the note.

"You are too good, I cannot accept it," she said.

"You must, it is for a good cause," he replied.

He glanced at the desk before him, evidently in thought, his fingers playing idly with a card. It turned over. Lord Studley gave one glance at the name, Sir Henry Loudham, and started as though he had been stung.

"How did this card come here?" he asked Maude in a stern voice, and she quailed before his look.

"He's a friend of mine, Lord Studley," she faltered.

"A friend of yours. What kind of a friend? Do you know who he is?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I suppose he's what you'd call a man about town."

Lord Studley looked at her with an expression of such contempt on his handsome face that Maude covered her face, and said :

"Don't look at me like that. I cannot bear it."

"I will tell you who Sir Henry is," he said, slowly.

"Look at me, Maude Bradley."

She glanced up at him as he spoke.

"Sir Henry Loudham is my sister's husband."

Maude Bradley gave a pained, stifled cry, and sank back into her chair moaning.

"Yes, he's my sister's husband," he went on. "He has ruined her fair young life. Chained to a man like that what a future she has before her! And this is where Sir Henry spends his time, with Maude Bradley, the Queen of Love, the beauty of the Alcazar, the divine goddess who makes her sex cry shame as she displays her charms upon the stage. You are the woman who has ruined my sister's life. God, and you are the woman I thought I might save for a better life. How like you are to my dead angel, and yet it is infamy to couple her name with yours. Have you no mercy, woman? Think

of that brother who lives and loves you still, not knowing what you are."

A gesture of despair from Maude, but he went on.

"Think of him and weep. Had he a wife and I tempted her away what would you think of me? You have tempted my sister's husband and he has forsaken everything for you. Keep the note I gave you. A Studley never yet broke his word. Keep your part of the contract and I will keep mine. You cannot love this man?" he said, suddenly.

"In pity hear me," said Maude. "Sir Henry pestered me with his attentions. He is a great friend of Trollit's, and is constantly behind the scenes. He came here with the manager and two or three more to supper. He would not leave me. I never knew he was married. But I swear to you, Lord Studley, by all I hold sacred, Sir Henry is nothing nor has he been anything to me. He has made me presents. Who has not? He shall never enter my house again. I will never speak to him again. Do not despise me, Lord Studley. Indeed I am not so much to blame in this matter. Oh! what a wretched woman I am, and how miserable," and proud, handsome Maude Bradley burst into tears.

Lord Studley looked at her until she was calm, and then said:

"I believe what you say. When does Sir Henry call here again?"

"This afternoon," said Maude.

"I will receive him," said Lord Studley. Maude looked frightened. "Sir Henry is so violent. He may do you harm. Let me see him, I will dismiss him at once."

"No. I shall see him," he said, sternly. "The

family honour is at stake. Thank Heaven, it has gone no further."

Lord Studley kept his word. He did see Sir Henry Loudham and the interview was brief. What transpired he did not say, but he told Maude Bradley that Sir Henry would not see her again.

When Lord Studley was gone Maude felt sad and weary. She appeared at the Alcazar that night. Lord Studley was there, and it was with a glance of pleasure he noticed she wore a more modest costume in the second act.

It is strange how platonic friendships are sometimes formed which in later days bear good fruit. The meeting of Lord Studley and Maude Bradley may be a commonplace incident but it was to bring about results little expected at the time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON A PRIVATE TRACK.

ONCE more Tilly found herself in the old home at Yeronga, and her father and Miss Rowton were there also. The Hon. Robert could not persuade Rolf to take over the old place.

"No," he said; "you have more right to Yeronga than I have, Mr. Briscoe. I have bought it certainly, but it was more a matter of luck than anything else enabled me to do so. Had it not been for the kindness of Nat Smiley I should never have had the chance,

To settle the matter, you must live at Yeronga as usual and I will accept a nominal rent for it. When matters have all been arranged at the Creek I hope to ask a great boon from you, and I fancy you can guess what it will be," said Rolf.

Briscoe smiled. He knew Rolf meant he should ask him for Tilly, and Briscoe felt he could give her to such a man with safety.

And so it was all settled and matters went on at Yeronga much in the same style as when Rolf came there as a station hand.

Now the trouble was over the fresh colour came back to Tilly's cheeks, and the Hon. Robert shook off the load of care which had oppressed him, and once more took an interest in all matters connected with the Station.

Rolf is often at Yeronga, and there is no fear now of his getting bushed during his ride.

The Outlaw was sent to Yeronga, and Nat and Rolf had decided David Hilton should go with the horse to look after and train him. This suited Hilton immensely, for he was very proud of the colt, and felt he could get him fit to win a big race.

Fred Martin and Hilton soon struck up a friendship, and had long chats in the quietude of The Outlaw's box as to what the horse would be capable of doing.

"By the way he gallops I should say he was a clinker," said Fred, as he eyed the horse affectionately.

"You bet he is, Fred," said Hilton. "I bred him and I know what he's worth. He'll win the Sydney Cup if Mr. Standish sends him for it, take my word. It'll be a big task for him, but he'll get a light weight."

"When are you going to give him a spin?" said Fred.

"The boss said he should be here to-night, and I mean to have a go on the private track in the morning if he comes," said Hilton.

"What horses shall you try him with?" said Fred.

"Testator and Coal Queen," said Hilton. "They're quite good enough for the purpose, and I'll bet a fiver The Outlaw will run rings round 'em."

"You're pretty sanguine," said Fred. "I'm not much of a gambler. Tell me the weights you'll have up, and I'll bet you a fiver the young 'un gets done."

"Mr. Standish can ride Testator, I'll mount Coal Queen, and our lad Williams can get upon The Outlaw at about seven stone," said Hilton.

"That'll suit me," said Fred. "At those weights your pet will get beaten."

"If he wins I'll acknowledge it will be a great go over a mile and a half," said Hilton; "but I'm not afraid, and I'll stick to the wager."

Rolf and Nat Smiley arrived at Yeronga the afternoon this conversation took place.

They were heartily welcomed, as usual. Rolf and Tilly had much to chat about, and Briscoe found Nat Smiley a man after his own heart.

It was arranged the horses should have a good gallop over a mile and a half on the private track next morning.

Several large stations in the West have their own private tracks laid down, and over them some remarkable performances take place.

The track at Yeronga was in excellent condition. It was made on raised ground in front of the house, and a tan track was also put down inside the grass course.

It was a lovely bright morning as the horses came out of the stables all ready saddled for the fray.

A pretty picture indeed. Tilly was there on a fine half-bred colt, only just broken in, and Briscoe was mounted on a stiff cob. Nat Smiley said he preferred to walk it, he felt safer on his legs.

Fred Martin looked on at the preparations with a supercilious air. He had an idea Hilton would find out he had made a mistake, and felt the fiver he had wagered as good as in his pocket.

"Well, Fred, how do you like the colt?" said Rolf.

"He's not a bad looking one, by any means. A good deal of his sire about him. He'll not win the trial this morning though. The test is a bit too severe for a young raw one like him," replied Fred.

"I fancy he'll clean the lot out. What do you say, Tilly?" said Rolf.

"I must back my own mare," laughed Tilly, "and I fancy Hilton will win on Coal Queen. I shall be very angry with him if he does not."

"Let's have a sweep on it," said Nat. "Here's a sov. for myself, and one for Miss Rowton. She's not here, but she'll appreciate it if she wins, I have no doubt."

"Bravo, Nat. I believe you're smitten in that quarter," said Briscoe. "I'm blessed if we shan't have Miss Rowton married after all."

"Nonsense," said Nat. "I'm not a marrying man, Mr. Briscoe. I've had a little too much experience of the sex, begging Miss Briscoe's pardon."

"Oh, don't mind me," laughed Tilly, "I've had some experience of your sex, too, and I can tell you they are not all Rolfs."

"No, by Jove, they're not," said Nat.

"Cut it short," said Rolf. "Here's two sovs., one for Tilly and one for myself."

Briscoe joined in the fun, and as there were five of them in it, they agreed to put in a couple of blanks.

"My luck," said the Hon. Robert, as he drew out a blank, "I've had nothing else but blanks lately, lad. Never mind, I'll get a big prize some day, I suppose."

"Of course you will, dad," said Tilly.

"Coal Queen. Miss Briscoe," said Fred.

"Bravo," said Tilly, as she clapped her hands. "Now, Hilton, I'll lay you half the stake."

"All right, Miss. I'll get every ounce out of the Queen," he said.

Miss Rowton drew The Outlaw, and Nat Smiley Testator.

A move was made for the race-ground.

"What sort of a lad is Williams?" said Rolf to Hilton.

"A real good boy, sir. He's better than many a lad that gets good mounts at Randwick, and I'd trust him in a real good race."

"What weight can he ride?"

"Six seven with ease," said Hilton, "and a pound or two less, if necessary."

"Has he been riding The Outlaw at exercise?" said Rolf.

"Yes, and the colt likes the lad. Outlaw's got a temper of his own, but he don't show much of it with Williams," said Hilton.

"I am anxious to see how this trial goes. I've a great mind to run The Outlaw for the next Sydney Cup, if all's well," said Rolf.

"He'll meet some clinkers in it, but I know what he is, and I think he'll be among them at the finish," said Hilton.

"This will be a real good go, Nat," said Rolf. "I'm

about 9stone 8lb. now, I suppose. Hilton's about half a stone less, and we've weighted Williams to carry 7stone 7lb."

"That's a big weight for the colt," said Nat.

"Not it. He's big enough to carry 9stone, and he'd do it too, if I'm not mistaken," said Rolf.

"We shall see," said Nat. "I'll bet you a fiver he don't win."

"Done," said Rolf, laughing. "This will be quite a sporting affair after all."

Once on the track they were quickly in the saddle. Testator moved freely, and Coal Queen, pulling at her bridle, seemed inclined to bolt.

The Outlaw, after a few rears and plunges, settled down quietly.

"Let's have a canter first," said Rolf, and they went away at a slow pace.

"Moves well," said Rolf, as he eyed The Outlaw over.

"He does," said Hilton, "you'll say so when he lays himself out. I'll make the running on Coal Queen, and you can race alongside the youngster. It's at the finish he'll get beaten, if anywhere, but I think he'll come well out of it."

"I hope so," said Rolf, "I'd like to beat that brute, Rushton, with a dark horse."

"You'll never have a better chance," said Hilton.

They were at the starting post again, where Tilly, Briscoe, and Nat Smiley were waiting.

"I'll canter down to the finish, and be judge," said Tilly, and off she went, sitting her horse like a model.

"I'll start," said Nat. "If you give me much trouble I'll fine the lot of you."

They waited until they saw Tilly at the finishing post, and then Nat sent them away together.

Coal Queen went off at a good pace, and Rolf had to do all he knew to hold Testator back. The Outlaw seemed to move freely, but hardly went so well as Rolf expected.

At half a mile Williams shook the colt up, and he responded, but he could not leave Testator.

Hilton glanced round, and improved the pace. On they went, and at the mile post Rolf had sent Testator up to the Queen's girths. The Outlaw was still in the rear, and Rolf fancied the lad must be waiting to make his run later on.

"Perhaps the pace is too slow," thought Rolf, "I'll let Testator out."

He did, and the horse shot past Coal Queen like a flash.

Hilton glanced over his shoulder, but could not see The Outlaw.

"Dash the lad, where the deuce is he?" he thought.

The winning-post was reached. "Testator an easy winner, Coal Queen next, The Outlaw beaten off."

Such was Tilly's verdict, and she laughed heartily as she saw the look of blank surprise depicted on Hilton's face.

"Well, I'm blessed," said that worthy, as he got off Coal Queen. "Can't make it out at all. Trial's all wrong, that I'll swear."

"Nonsense," said Rolf; "you've made a mistake, Hilton. The colt's not good enough. He's hardly worth training at this rate."

"He's no good," said Fred. "I wish I was as certain of winning a fiver every day, as when I bet Hilton he wouldn't win."

"You be blowed!" said Hilton rather savagely. He

was hurt at the downfall of his pet, and could not help showing it.

"Can't make it out," said Williams. "He moved all right at first, but he wouldn't leave Testator. He's a bit faint-hearted I think. I didn't ride him right out, but he could not have been much nearer."

"It's all up trying to win a race with the brute," said Rolf, "you can train him on, if you like, Hilton, but it's a mere waste of time."

"Thank you, sir," said Hilton; "I fancy he'll upset this trial some fine day, and come out of his shell a bit. Some horses won't gallop in private. Wait till he sees the colours up, and gets among the crowd, and I'll bet he cuts up a bit different."

"Let's hope so," said Rolf. He'll have to shape a little better than that to win a cup."

The hollow defeat of The Outlaw was a disappointment to Rolf. He liked the looks of the colt, and even now he could hardly understand the poor display he had made.

"Perhaps Hilton's right," he thought. "Some young 'uns won't answer questions when they are asked. I'd like to give Rushton a beating with him. Testator ran well. Perhaps he will turn out better than we expected."

"Some curious ups and downs in life," said Briscoe, as they were seated on the verandah that night, with the moon shining above them casting a pale, delicate tint over the fair landscape.

"There are, indeed," said Rolf.

"Here you are Master of Yeronga, and I'm—well fairly out in the cold—only your tenant. I'm glad I've got such a good landlord," said Briscoe.

"The sort of landlord, I guess, who never asks for his rent," laughed Nat.

"Rent. There can be no such matters as rent between Mr. Briscoe and myself," said Rolf. "Had it not been for his kindness I should never have had the luck I have had."

"You must have got on sooner or later, Rolf," said Briscoe. "A man like you could never be kept down for long."

"But how many men have been kept down for want of a helping hand in the time of need?" said Rolf.

"That's true," said Nat. "Many a real good fellow has had to knock under in Australia because he's always been pushed down hill instead of being helped up. I'll tell you a bit of good news, Mr. Briscoe," said Nat.

"What is it?" said the Hon. Robert.

"The 'Lucky Digger Mine' shares have risen rapidly, and will rise still. When you can clear enough out of them to buy Yeronga, sell out, and Rolf will give up the old place at the price he—or as Rolf prefers to put it—we gave for it."

"Man alive the shares will never go up to that price," said Briscoe.

"Won't they," said Nat. "You wait and see. You've not heard the last of the 'Lucky Digger Mine' yet, take my word for it."

"I should like to buy the old place back," said Briscoe. "It hit me hard to part with it, but it had to go. Thank Heaven it's not fallen into the hands of strangers, and I've not been turned out of the old home. There are a thousand pleasant memories associated with this place, Rolf, and some sad ones," said Briscoe.

"It is surprising how people become attached to a home," said Rolf. "When my father was ruined, and we had to leave the old home, it nearly broke my heart, and my sister's. It is my earnest wish to buy the old

home back again, and I will do it some day if possible."

"Have you written to your sister?" said Nat.

"Yes, I wrote and told her of my good fortune, and asked her to come out and join us. Poor girl, she must have had a lonely life. I know what it is to be dependent upon others."

"Will she come?" said Nat.

"Oh, yes. No doubt about that," said Rolf. "It is a long time since I had news of her, but I left her safe with some of our people, and they would take great care of her."

"Wish I had some kith and kin to care for me," said Nat. "I'm a lonely sort of cuss. There was no joy in my heart until I met you, Rolf, but now I feel I've done some good, and that I have one pal in the world who will be true to me."

"You have, Nat," said Rolf. "A mate who will be true till death."

"That's it, lads, pull together and you'll never regret it," said Briscoe. "The friendship of two honest men is stronger even than the marriage ties."

"You're right there," said Nat. "Marriage ties are sometimes easily broken, at least I found mine were."

"Have you ever been married?" said Rolf, in surprise.

"Yes," said Nat. "It is a sad story, and we will let it drop. I once had a wife I loved well. She was false, and left me for a scoundrel, who quickly tired of his toy, and deserted her. That man has to settle with me yet. I often meet him, and he little thinks I know his secret. The villain kept it very quiet, but I tracked him out. I have sworn to ruin him, and by —— I'll do it," and Nat brought his fist down with a thump that shook the verandah.

"I'd shoot him dead," said Rolf.

"That death would be too good for him," said Nat. "I'd like him to feel the sting of poverty first. I'd like to see him want for a crust of bread, and be kicked from the house doors when he begged for it. He holds his head high now Rolf, but the time will come when he will fall. The dark shadow has already commenced to dim his life. His money is going fast, and he cannot make more. I never make a mistake. He will go to the wall, and that before very long."

"Who is the man?" said Briscoe.

"That is my secret, Mr. Briscoe" said Nat. "I will tell you some day when I have had my revenge. The man is a villain. I might have been compelled to speak out under certain circumstances. The need to do so does not exist now, and I prefer to work in my own way."

"It was impertinent in me to ask you," said Briscoe.

"Not at all," said Nat. "Let's change the subject. When's the wedding Rolf?"

"What wedding?" said Rolf.

"Ahem!" laughed Nat.

"Oh, I see. Just when Mr. Briscoe and Tilly are willing," said Rolf. "We mean to enjoy a few months of courtship before we enter the bonds of matrimony."

"Quite right," said Briscoe. "Look before you leap. Perhaps you will not find Tilly all you require. I'll keep her with all her blemishes."

"She's an angel. She's——," said Rolf.

"Drop it," said Nat. "I've no doubt she's all you say, but I've heard so much about angels in my time that I actually prefer, for a change, to hear about the other things."

As Nat went into his room, Rolf called out :

"Mind you don't get a visit from one of your demon friends to-night, then."

Nat had a visit from one of his "demon friends," and the face of the man who had wronged him was seen in his troubled dreams.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

IN a small, obscure, and hardly respectable street in the heart of Sydney, and in a house the appearance of which was not prepossessing, resided a woman who has much to do with this story. As we see her now she sits in a dingy, dull, small room. The faded carpet, the dirty wall-paper, the dusty furniture, the grimy curtains, all betokened carelessness and neglect. In one corner of the room was a bed which denoted that the occupant used the place as a sleeping apartment as well as sitting-room. She was evidently a lodger in the house, and not a favourite one either.

The woman herself was negligently dressed. She was not old, not even middle-aged. Traces of beauty still lingered over her face. Her unkempt hair straggled about and stuck up on end, or hung down as though it felt disgraced. Her dress was not a common material, but it had been carelessly used. The whole appearance of the woman showed she was utterly lost to the sense of her former position, whatever it had been. She nervously clasped her hands together and stared out of the window. Then she rose and walked about the room

in the same aimless fashion. Rather tall, and with a figure which must have been graceful once, small feet and delicate hands still. Certain marks of good breed and signs of better days were present there. She was evidently waiting for something or someone. As the time passed she became impatient.

At last she could stand it no longer, and tugged violently at the bell.

A maid servant with a "black kitchen" face and grimy, sooty hands put her head in at the door with the polite salutation—

"What's up now?"

"Tell Mrs. Squirm I want to see her," said the woman in a not unpleasant but rather thick voice.

"Mrs. Squirm says it's no use. Her can't give you any more sugar. Says you mun wait till he comes," growled the girl.

The woman stamped her foot and said—

"Get out, you baggage. Don't talk to a lady like that. Send Mrs. Squirm here immediately or I'll leave the house."

"I'd guess it 'ud suit missis down to the boots," said the girl with a grin.

"Would it, you little heathen?" was the answer, and the woman reached for some article to act as a missile. The girl saw preparations for war being made, and beat a speedy retreat. In a few minutes a stout, red-faced woman, with a countenance not altogether devoid of good nature, came into the room.

"Now, Mrs. Nevton, what's the matter? I can't have the house disturbed. What do you want?" said Mrs. Squirm.

"What do I want? What do I always want? What

shall I always want to my dying day?" replied the woman addressed as Mrs. Nevton.

"You're a deal better without any more," began Mrs. Squirm.

"Now Squirmy, it's no use saying that. I must have some. I expect that brute here to-day, and if he doesn't come down handsome I'll make it hot for him. He's ruined my life, and he shall pay for it or I'll know the reason why," said Mrs. Nevton.

"If I was you," ungrammatically began Mrs. Squirm, "I'd be careful how I raised Mr. N.'s ire. He's a bit of a rough 'un when he's rubbed the wrong way."

"I know him better than you, Squirm. He's a coward. He's a bad man, but not a bold one. He hasn't the heart of a mouse. I tell you he must come down handsome or it'll be the worse for him. Now get me some brandy at once," said Mrs. Nevton.

So it was brandy that solaced the woman's desolate hours. Had she been driven to it to drown remorse? A casual observer would have said so.

Mrs. Squirm looked glum. "You owe me four pounds now," she said. "It's a lot for me to lose, and my old man's a bit fidgety about your dear husband paying up."

"Then he needn't be. He or you shall have the money to-night," said Mrs. Nevton.

"The same terms?" said Mrs. Squirm.

"Yes. Bring a bottle of the best and you can have your share."

Mrs. Squirm hesitated a moment. She was fond of a "nip," as she called it, just to comfort her. She had always been paid by her lodger, and had profited considerably out of her fatal taste for drink. She fumbled in her pocket, and at last brought out half-a-sovereign.

"That's all I've got," she said. "I'll try and get it you, but this will be for the last time."

As Mrs. Squirm had said this about twice a week for the past six months the answer appeared to give satisfaction.

"Hurry off, there's a good soul, I'm nearly dead for it," said Mrs. Nevton.

The landlady disappeared on her mission, and in a short time returned. She produced from the depths of an enormous pocket a suspicious-looking bottle.

"Here it is. I'd ever such a job to get it. My old man has told the landlord of the Slip Inn if he sees me with any more of it he'll inform the police how he carries on the Sunday trade."

Mrs. Nevton had likewise heard this yarn for the past six months, and smiled faintly. She knew what answer was expected of her, and she said,

"Is Mr. Squirm in?"

"I believe he's down stairs. He was on night duty last night," said Mrs. Squirm.

Her "old man" was often on night duty, and occasionally brought a variety of miscellaneous articles home.

"Tell him to come and have a glass," said Mrs. Nevton.

Mrs. Squirm called out "Blossom," and in response came a roar from the depths below.

"What's up? Can't yer let a fellow sleep who's been hard at work all night?"

"Mrs. Nevton wants yer, Blossom." This in a coaxing voice from Mrs. Squirm.

"Blossom," otherwise the "old man," otherwise "Mr. Squirm," came growling up stairs. He had been nicknamed "Blossom" by his acquaintances because his

nose had a tendency to develope into a huge mass of pimples, which varied in hue according to the amount of liquor he took. He came slouching into the room and sat down.

"Have a drink, Blossom," said Mrs. Newton.

"Thank you, marm, but I never touch it. No more does the old 'oman," he replied.

After much pressing Blossom's scruples were overcome, likewise his wife's, and the two settled steadily down to the bottle.

They quickly made an impression on the liquid, which in turn also made an impression upon the two "ladies." Blossom appeared to carry his share very well.

"Expect him to-night?" said Blossom with a nod of the head in the direction of the doorway.

"I expect Mr. Newton this evening," said Mrs. Newton.

"Bring any cash with him?" said Blossom. "About time he did."

"Of course he will, and a good lump it must be this time. I've stood enough of his impudence already. There'll have to be a change; I'm sick of this life," she said.

"You'll not get much out of him. He's lost a power of money of late," said Blossom.

"How do you know?" she said with stupefied surprise, "you don't know him."

"Oh, doesn't I?" said Blossom, "I think I does. He's an out and outer, a regular scoundrel; his name's not Newton if you're is."

"How dare you insult me, you brute," screamed Mrs. Newton. "It is his name, I tell you."

"And I tell yer it's not," said Blossom.

"Be quiet," said Mrs. Squirm. "Let her alone, Blossom."

The poor thing's quite enough to put up with," and she broke out into maudlin tears of sympathy.

Order having been restored, the bottle was again passed round.

"How did you get to know him?" queried Mrs. Newton.

"That's what I shan't tell yer," he replied. "I know he's a swell, and has lots of money. He's been took down a bit of late, and he's going in big for racing and betting, which'll take a lot more out of him. You just pinch him for a lump of ready now he's got it if you don't want to be kept out in the cold. That's friendly advice."

Mrs. Newton poured out more brandy and drank it off.

"That'll give me nerve," she said. "I must get at him to-night. Curse him! He's caused me trouble enough."

"And so you have him, I'll bet," thought Blossom, but not wishing to create a disturbance kept the matter to himself.

Blossom and his wife went out and left Mrs. Newton to finish the remainder of the brandy, which from former experience they knew she would not be long doing.

"That cove will settle her one of these days," said Blossom. "He's a real bad 'un. Murder's not above what he dare do."

"Where did you meet him, Blossom?" asked his wife.

"Never you mind. Keep yer eye on yerself, and let me alone. All I can say is, if he gets his devil up, and she nags at him, he'll be fit to do her a mischief. He's been worried enough of late," said Blossom.

"Poor soul! She's a hard time of it," said Mrs. Squirm.

"And sarve her right. She's left a good 'un for him. She'd be mad if she knew now. Her real husband's got a mint of sugar."

"Has he?" said Mrs. Squirm.

"Yes, he has, and he's a man worth forty on him," said Blossom.

A violent ring at the bell stopped their talk.

"That's the chap, I'll bet," said Blossom. "Hurry up and let him in. If he asks, tell him I'm out."

Mrs. Squirm hurried off and opened the door.

A man, well muffled up, with dark blue spectacles on, entered.

"She's in there," said Mrs. Squirm. "Poor dear, she's been expecting to see you for a long time."

"Be off," was the gruff response; and he strode into Mrs. Nevton's room.

"Brandy again. Drunk as usual, I suppose," he said.

The room had a stuffy odour like a bar opened in the morning after an all night carouse.

"Is that all you've got to say," she replied, as she lighted the lamp—there was no gas—with an unsteady hand.

"Quite enough too. A nice object you are," he said as he glanced at her with a look of hatred.

"Who made me what I am? Yourself, Richard Rushton," she replied, "and you know it."

It was Richard Rushton. He had removed his glasses and coat, and there could be no mistaking the man now. What a thorough-paced scoundrel he must be. Tilly Briscoe had indeed had a narrow escape.

"I never ruined you," growled Rushton. "You were only too willing to run away from that greenhorn of a husband of yours."

"He was worth a hundred such men as you," she retorted.

"Was he? Well, perhaps it will console you to know he's worth nearly a hundred times as much as I am now. Your dear husband, Nat Smiley, is a rich man," he said.

Poor Nat Smiley. This then was the woman who had embittered his life. This the man upon whom he had determined to wreak his vengeance. With Rolf and Nat on his track there was little hope of escape for Rushton.

"A Rich man?" she said, in a thick voice.

"Very rich. Called the 'lucky digger' now. It was a deucid good job when he got rid of such a baggage as you. Curse my luck. I always made bad bargains."

"You were glad enough to get me once," she said. "You'd better not taunt me too much, Dick. I'm a desperate woman. You've given me no money for a month. I must have some to-night, or I shall be turned out of this hole."

"What then?" was the brutal reply.

She stared at him as she replied :

"What then? You cowardly brute. You'd never dare turn me into the streets to starve."

"You'd never starve. You're too artful for that," he said, savagely.

If a look could have killed him Rushton would have fallen dead on the spot. He quailed a little. He felt he had gone too far.

"It's no good quarrelling," he said. "I'm rather hard up, but I'll give you some money."

She did not speak. At last he said :

"Curse you, do you hear? I'll give you some money."

The fumes of the brandy were muddling her brain, and she replied :

"Of course you'll give me money. You daren't refuse it. Nat thinks I'm dead. Well, I'm very much alive, and if you don't part up I'll let him know where I am and how you've treated me. Although I did him a grievous wrong he'd forgive me, and then your life wouldn't be worth much."

Rushton was under the impression that Nat Smiley did not know he ran away with his wife. The base deed was done when Nat had been absent from home some time, and consequently Rushton felt safe on this score. But if she informed Smiley of her sad condition, and that he (Rushton) was the cause of it, he knew there would be a terrible vengeance in store for him.

"You tell him and I'll murder you," he said, and he looked as though he meant it.

"You coward, you would be afraid," she said. "I must have a hundred pounds or I'll make your life a misery."

"You do that now," he said. "You'll get no such sum from me. I'll give you £10 to-night and £10 next month—that will have to do you. I can't afford more."

"You must," she said, and he could see she was becoming excited.

"Must indeed ! You keep quiet or you'll get nothing. I wish I'd enough to make you drink yourself to death," he said.

"And who made me drink ?" she almost shrieked. "Who first tempted me with brandy ? Who first put vile thoughts into my head and made me the thing I am ? Answer these questions if you can."

Rushton smiled as he said :

"You'll have a fit if you go on like this. Keep

quiet, and I'll settle with the old hag who keeps this house, and pay you what I said I would. You can't expect more."

"I do, I do," she said, hysterically. "A hundred pounds, or you'll repent it to your dying day."

Rushton ground his teeth with rage. He turned on the unfortunate woman with an awful oath.

"Not a shilling shall you have now," he said. "You've driven me too far. Do your worst. I'm not afraid of Smiley, and he won't be much inclined to listen to you."

He put on his coat and adjusted the blue glasses, and rose to go.

She rushed between him and the door and locked it.

"Give me the money," she hissed. The fatal liquor had done its work. She was almost mad.

"Stand aside," he said.

She never moved. For several moments they glanced at each other.

Then he made a step forward and caught her by the arm. She wrenched it away. He flew at her more like a wild beast than a man, and caught her by the throat with one hand and her hair with the other. He dragged her towards the fireplace, holding her throat tightly and preventing her screaming. Then he hurled her away with such force that she fell with her head on to the sharp point of the fender. A terrible crash. A fearful stillness.

She never moved. Rushton picked up the lamp and looked at her.

"D—— the woman," he said, in a frightful tone. "Why on earth did she aggravate me so. Luckily there is no one in the house but that old hag, or they'd have been here before now. I must get away."

Another look. Blood on the carpet. Slowly he saw it trickling from a wound in the temple. He was frightened. Could she be dead? He moved her. She did not stir. Not a sound. A horrid stillness pervaded the room. He felt her pulse. It did not beat. Her heart did not throb. For a moment terror seized the coward. Then he thought of himself. He must get away. If really dead it would be surmised she had fallen in a drunken fit and stunned herself. Not many signs of marks about her throat. He would go. He opened the door and staggered back as he met Blossom's leering face in the passage.

"Stop a minute, Governor," he said; "I've something to say about this lot. Can't have women kicked and cuffed about like this in my house."

He came in and put his back to the door.

"Now, Mr. Rushton," he went on, "let us look what you've been up to."

Rushton started again. The man knew him. He was caught in a trap.

Blossom knelt down facing Rushton and lifted the poor woman's head. For a minute or two he looked at the wan face with a gaze almost of pity. Then he said :

"She's dead."

"Not she," said Rushton. "She was drunk, and fell against the fender. She's in a stupor. She'll soon get out of that."

"I tell yer she's dead," said Blossom. "No use trying to get over me. Shall I send the old woman for a doctor?"

"No, no," said Rushton, hurriedly. "I'll leave her in your care. If it comes to the worst she must have killed herself accidentally in a drunken fit. You understand."

"How much do I understand?" said Blossom. "I heard every word you said. I was just outside the door."

Rushton looked as if he would have liked to strangle the man.

"What do you want?" said Rushton.

"Money," said Blossom. "Five hundred down."

"Can't do it," said Rushton. "Will give you a hundred, and another in a month."

Blossom thought for a moment. He had this man in his power. He would accept it. He could bleed him again when required.

Rushton handed over ten ten-pound notes, which Blossom counted out.

"Keep quiet," said Rushton. "Is she really dead?"

"Clean gone," said Blossom, "look at her."

Rushton gave a glance at the white face and could not doubt what the man said.

"Meet me at —," said Rushton, "and I'll pay you the other hundred."

"All right. It's a queer job, but I'll manage it somehow," said Blossom. "One good thing it was well known hercabouts she drank heavily."

Rushton sneaked out of the house. He felt he was in this man's power, and once more "the wages of sin" came home to him. †

No sooner had Rushton gone than Blossom called his wife.

"She's dead," said Blossom.

Mrs. Squirm gave a shriek. "Mercy on us, what will become of us?" she said.

Blossom explained matters and they carried her gently and placed her on the bed. Mrs. Squirm hurried out of the room, too frightened to remain.

"I wonder if she's really gone," said Blossom. "It's too risky to send for a doctor. I'll chance it." And with this he sat down by the woman's side to see what the night would bring forth.

CHAPTER XX.

HUSH MONEY.

WHEN Rushton quitted Blossom Squirm's house he hurried as fast as possible into the heart of the city. He had never felt such real fear for a bad action committed before. Murder. No, he could not call it by that hideous name. It was a mere accident. Was she dead? He felt there could be little doubt of it. How cold and still she looked, and that awful quiet calm in her face haunted him. Would Blossom keep silent? If he were well paid probably he would, but Rushton felt it would be difficult to get rid of the man now he had such a hold over him. There was a feeling of relief, mingled with his compunction, that he had got rid of the woman he had led to her ruin. He could not fail to see the change the life she had led wrought in her. Dissipation had done its work, and this was the outcome of it all. He must meet this man as speedily as possible, and learn the result of the blow she had received. He reached his club, and wrote a note which he addressed to Mrs. Squirm in preference to her husband. In it he appointed a meeting with Blossom for the following night. Next day he felt miserable. Towards

night he went down Pitt Street until he reached Tattersall's.

Here he met several betting men he knew well, and he passed into the club-room with two of the fraternity.

"There goes the biggest blackguard among the swells," said one man to himself.

"Much good they'll get out of Rushton," said another. It was evident he was not well liked or respected.

Rushton was not a heavy gambler at cards and dice, and after a few games he got up and went to the bar.

"Good night, Mr. Rushton," said Tom Fleming, a reliable bookmaker. "I hear your mare, Lobelia, is going great guns, and that you mean to have a cut in for the Sydney Cup with her. Is that correct, or is it too much of a secret to let out?"

"It's not much of a secret, Fleming," said Rushton. "The mare is fit now, but will be at her best about Sydney Cup time. She'll win it if she can, but what about that horse that beat her at Melrose Creek? I hear he's at Yeronga, and doing well."

"So I heard. They've got a chap named Hilton looking after him. He'll never beat your mare, though. I saw the race at the Creek, and it would have been any odds on Lobelia had the ground been in a proper state," said Fleming.

"That's what I think," said Rushton. "This fellow, Hilton, can't know much about horses. Curse the man, he hoodwinked me over that Yeronga sale. I ought never to have let that go out of my hands."

"You don't seem particularly fond of the Briscoe crowd," said Fleming. "From all I know of Mr. Briscoe he's a decent man, and his daughter—well, she's a clinker."

"He's no better than anybody else," growled Rush-

ton. "That fellow, Smiley, and his mate had to pull him through, and little chance they'll have of getting their money back."

"There's been a commission in the market to back Testator during the week," said Fleming. "But I don't know whether it's from the stable."

"Must be," said Rushton. "No one else would back such a half-bred brute."

"They accepted 25's about him to a fair amount," said Fleming.

"What will you lay my mare?" said Rushton.

"She's about as good a favourite as anything," said Fleming. "But as it's some time before the race will be run, I'll lay you fifteens."

"I'll take twenties," said Rushton.

"Can't do it, sir. She's too good for that. I've offered you a long price as it is."

"I'll take £1500 to £100," said Rushton, and Fleming booked the debt.

At that moment Rushton's trainer entered the room, and called him aside.

"Want you to come out to Randwick to-morrow morning, Mr. Rushton. I'm going to give the mare a spin just to see what she's like. I've got a trial horse that ought to give a good line as to the mare's chance of success."

"Can't come to-morrow," said Rushton.

"Then I will put it off until I have seen you again," said the trainer.

"Very well," was the reply.

Rushton left the room, and walked towards Bathurst Street. He had not to wait long, for he quickly discovered his man coming slowly down the street.

They met, and Rushton was the first to speak.

"Let's go in here," he said. "We shall be out of the way."

They passed into a small hotel, and went into the parlour. There were a few men in the bar, but Rushton tipped the landlord and got the room door shut, and he locked it on the inside.

"How is she?" he said, as he sat down opposite the man.

"Dead," said Blossom. "No doubt about it. Never spoke after you left, poor thing. It was a 'nation cruel blow to give her."

"You lying dog, I never struck her," said Rushton. "She fell down in a drunken fit. I merely pushed her away."

"How about the black marks on her throat, then?" said Blossom.

Rushton cursed him, and said :

"If she's gone it can't be helped. Now, how are you going to manage?"

"I've got a doctor's certificate," said Blossom, as he pulled the document forth, "but it cost me a good bit of money. He asked me some nasty questions, but he's one of the sort that don't make much of a living, and has come down in the world. Still, the certificate's good enough at any rate."

"Looks genuine," said Rushton. He never doubted Blossom for a moment. His anxiety was to get rid of this unfortunate woman, whom he hated, even now she was dead.

"I'll bury her to-morrow," said Blossom. "Perhaps you'd like to attend the funeral?"

Rushton made an impatient gesture.

"Get her out of the way. You know it was all an accident, I never meant to hurt her."

"Perhaps it was, and perhaps it wasn't," said Blossom. "At any rate, you did for her, there's no mistake about that. It'll cost a lot of money before it's finished."

"You've got plenty to go on with," said Rushton.

"Have I?" said Blossom. "Well, I just want five hundred pounds, or I'll have no more to do with it. It's more than my life's worth. It's an aiding and abetting, that's what it is."

"You don't come that game on me," said Rushton. "I gave you fifty last night, and you shall have the other fifty next month."

"That won't do," said Blossom. "Five hundred or I throw up the job."

"Hush money you want, you scoundrel?" said Rushton.

"Don't care what yer call it, and I'm no more a scoundrel nor you," said Blossom.

The man had been trying to speak more as an equal, but now he had lapsed into his ordinary vernacular.

"I have not got the money," said Rushton.

"Oh, yes yer have," said Blossom. "Bloo'mi, I know yer has."

"If I have, you cannot get it to-night," said Rushton.

"Yes I can, and I mean to have it afore she's under ground. Out of sight out of mind, with you, mister. Once she's buried you'll feel a bit safer, but even then I've got yer in my power," said Blossom.

Rushton thought for a few moments, and then said :

"Suppose I give you this five hundred. You will never apply to me again?"

"Never, so help me," said Blossom.

"How can I believe a man like you," said Rushton, with a glance of contempt.

"There's fellars as low down in the world as me, are

more to be depended on than swells like you, Mr. Rushton," said Blossom, and for once the reprobate was not far off the mark.

"If you mean what you say, I'll get you the money to-night," said Rushton. "I know where I can get a cheque cashed for that amount."

"At Tatt's, I'll bet," said Blossom. "Do the coves play high in there, sir?"

Blossom, like many hangers-on of race-courses, had a high opinion of the glory of being a member of "Tatt's," as they called it, and the fact that Rushton held that desirable position induced Blossom to address him respectfully, more especially as he felt he would get the sum asked for.

"Play for thousands," said Rushton, mechanically. He was thinking about something else.

"Ah!" sighed Blossom. "That's more exciting nor dominoes for 'two ales.' Could you give me a straight tip, sir?"

"No," said Rushton. "Mind your own business. If I did know anything I wouldn't give it to such a gallows bird as you are."

The answer showed how little tact Rushton possessed. Had he given Blossom a tip, even a bad one, he would have thought much of it. Men like Blossom love to get "the straight grif," as they term it, from an owner, or even a second-rate jockey. Blossom felt hurt.

"All right," he said sulkily. "Let me have the money."

They went out, and Rushton obtained what he required from a heavy winner in the rooms. He gave Blossom the money, and said:

"If you bother me again I'll horsewhip you. If you split I'll hang you. The woman lived in your house.

I've found out your character, and it's one the police are well acquainted with. It would be easy to saddle you with this business, my good fellow."

"I'll hold my tongue, and not bother you," said Blossom. "But you needn't be hard on a cove. I've treated you civil."

Blossom counted the notes, and crammed them into his pocket.

Rushton turned on his heel and left him without a word.

Blossom made the best of his way homewards. The man chuckled to himself strangely. "The cowardly brute," he thought. "How easily he was gulled. He believed every word I said. I've got the money, and if we keep still I'll get more. He'll have to bleed, and serve him right. Five hundred and fifty will give me a good start. Wouldn't give me a tip for the races. Oh indeed. Very well, Mr. Rushton. I know a thing or two, and I found out you've got a good 'un in Lobelia. She'll carry a bit of this for me if all goes on right," and he slapped the pocket with the cash in.

Blossom was evidently in high glee. He called at the Slip Inn and surprised the landlord by shouting for all hands and then purchasing a bottle of his best brandy.

"Had a haul, Blossom," said the landlord.

"Made a bit over the races," said Blossom. "Not often I do, but I did this time."

"Wish yer luck. How's the missus?"

"She's all right."

"How's the patient?" said the landlord, with a wink at the brandy bottle.

"She's all right, too. This ain't her shout, so you needn't wink at it. I've paid for this out of my own coin."

"Indeed," said the landlord. "You're generous, Blossom."

"I always were, so mind your own business," said Blossom, as he went out.

When he reached home he gave Mrs. Squirm such a heavy smack on the back he nearly upset her equilibrium.

"What's the matter," she said. "Had good luck, Blossom?"

"Rather. How much do you think, old woman?"

"Fifty!" she ventured to say.

"Fifty?" said Blossom, with contempt.

"More?" she asked.

"Of course," said Blossom.

Mrs. Squirm kept on guessing until at last Blossom lost his patience, and said :

"What would you think of five hundred?"

Mrs. Squirm nearly fell off her chair, and when Blossom produced the notes she almost fainted.

"It's a fortune, Blossom," she gasped.

"Fortune be ——," said Blossom. "There's more where they came from, or my name ain't Squirm. How is she?" he asked, quickly.

"Better," said Mrs. Squirm. "She's a bit queer in the head, but she'll soon be well again."

"We must keep her quiet," said Blossom. "He thinks she's dead. Let's go and see her?"

They went up stairs, and into the same dingy room where Rushton threw his mistress to the ground.

On the bed lay Nat Smiley's dishonoured wife. She was not dead, and Rushton had been deceived.

She looked at Squirm and his wife with wild eyes. At last she said :

"Has he gone? Oh, has he gone? Blossom, he'll murder me. Save me. Save me."

"All right, my girl," said Blossom, not unkindly, as he took her hand. "I'll look after you. He shan't come near you. I'll keep you comfortable, so long as you like to stop with the missus."

"You're very good, Blossom," she said. "He tried to strangle me. How my throat burns and my head throbs. Give me something to cool it."

Mrs. Squirms went out and returned with vinegar bandages and a little brandy.

"Now, my dear, try that."

The unfortunate woman drank the brandy eagerly, and fell back with a groan.

Blossom having heard the words uttered during the scene between her and Rushton, knew her real name, and who she was, for the "Lucky Digger" was well known in Sydney.

When she had fallen asleep, Blossom said to his wife :

"We're in luck, old woman. She's Nat Smiley's runaway wife. He's worth a mint of money. If he knew all he'd knife that fellow Rushton. Now, can't I pump the brute dry? He forgets I know his secret. If he won't part I'll put Smiley on his track. We'll look after her, old woman. She's not a bad sort, and that black-guard used her badly."

"I'll keep my eye on her, Blossom. Deary me, and to think we shall be rich after all. I must have a new gown, Blossom."

"New gown. Well, you're a beauty. Think how many bottles of comfort we could get for the price of a new gown," said Blossom.

"I'm shabbily dressed," she said. "I want a new gown. Haven't had a good one for years."

"You shall have it," said Blossom. "I'll spring three quid for it."

Mrs. Squirm pictured a lovely costume of green and red, not to mention certain yellow bows, she had seen in a cheap shop.

This pair in the lower walk of life, were not bad samples of their class. Blossom was a suspicious character, but he had his good points, and when he was "flush," as he termed it, he would spend his money freely for the benefit of Mrs. Squirm.

He never ill-used her, although he occasionally swore at her.

Richard Rushton was a far greater scoundrel than poor Blossom, whose education was none of the best, and who had never had the advantages wealth could procure.

Slumbering fitfully in the dingy room alone lay Nat Smiley's wretched wifc. How bitterly she must have repented the day she left his home and fled with Richard Rushton.

Will peace ever come again to her weary, broken heart? Will she ever see Nat's honest face again? Time alone can tell.

There she is. Not dead, as Richard Rushton imagines, but living to complete the links in the chain of vengeance her wronged husband is weaving around the scoundrel who tempted her to fall.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TRIAL AT DAWN.

NAT SMILEY's surmise that Rushton was getting short of ready money was correct. Never since he had been in the colonies had he been so hard pressed for cash. He had made money by fair means and foul, and spent it freely. To gratify his own pleasures he never spared money. Racing was with Rushton a passion. He had almost a mania for it. But it was not the healthy, wholesome enjoyment of possessing a good horse and seeing it win on its merits that stimulated his excitement. He cared but little for horses except as a means to gratify an end, which was gambling. It was nothing to Rushton if his horse made a gallant fight with a big weight and struggled into second place against some animal with a light impost. He would curse the noble animal that bore his colours well and gallantly if he did not manage to win him his heavy bets. The love of a horse for its own sake was not a feeling Rushton could ever know. He had too base a nature for such a sensation. Here was the vast difference between Rolf Standish and Rushton. Rolf loved a horse, and cared more for it than for the amount of money it could win him. He had seen many a well-ridden race without having a fraction on it, and got excited over the result as though thousands depended upon it. When he rode a horse he felt his pulses beat and his whole being glow with pleasure as it bounded under him, rejoicing in its strength and in the mastery of the rider. The true nature of a man can often be discovered by his actions towards dumb animals. I

have seen men kick a hungry, half-starved cur in the street because the poor beast had the impudence to whine and try in its dumb, patient way to solicit alms. Again, I have seen men who would go into a butcher's shop, and, putting down a coin, fling the meat purchased with it to the piteous animal in the street. Which of those men would you sooner trust? Is it not the same with human beings' actions towards each other. To kick a man when he is down may be a dastardly act, but is it not often done? Men in this world who have been hard hit or are down on their luck are looked upon as members outside the pale of respectable society. A threadbare coat often conceals beneath it an honest heart, while the smooth, rich cloth of the wealthy man hides a cowardly nature.

Rushton was determined he would go for a big coup on the Sydney Cup. His mare Lobelia had improved wonderfully, and he felt sure would run well with a decent weight. Anything under 9 stone he knew would suit her, and he expected she would be weighted at about 8 stone 10 lb. The entries were good, and the best horses in the colony were in the list, but he knew his mare was up to top form. When he saw the names of Testator and The Outlaw he smiled sarcastically and wondered what the devil that brute of an Outlaw was entered for. Rolf also wondered, but he had been persuaded by Hilton to do it. He had laughingly said,

"All right, Hilton, I'll enter him, but it shall be in your name. You can nominate him. I'm blessed if I care to have a brute like that running for me."

And so Testator was entered in the name of Messrs. Smiley and Standish, and The Outlaw in that of David Hilton.

Before commencing operations in the betting market

Rushton meant to have something to go upon, and accordingly a trial was determined. Rushton's trainer, a man named Marlow, had several good horses in his charge. He was not over scrupulous, and he preferred Rushton to his other employers because he spent his money freely. One particular horse in the Marlow stable, called *The Turk*, had won the Melbourne Cup with 8 stone 10 lb. as a four-year-old, and was looked upon as a real good thing for the Sydney Cup by the public, although he would no doubt be top weight. Rushton had a Hawkesbury winner in *Prince Rupert*, and three other very fair performers. Marlow had suggested they should try *Lobelia* at level weights with *The Turk*, and have *Prince Rupert* in to make the pace with a light weight.

"If she can beat *The Turk* at level weights," said Rushton, "she's an odds on chance, because they can't weight her out of it."

"She's in great buckle," said Marlow, "and I'd advise a pretty stiff trial, because if she did happen to go off a bit we could still have a margin to win with."

"*Prince Rupert* will rattle them along for a mile and a-half," said Rushton. "But how will you manage about *The Turk*? They'll never let him have a go with my mare."

"I'll fix that up. An off morning, and at dawn, before there's anyone out we'll do it. I'm responsible for *The Turk* and Mr. Fairfield will never ask questions. He fancies he's got the Sydney Cup in his pocket with *The Turk*, and so he has. I don't care a — if they give him 10 stone."

"He'll get all that," said Rushton. "It will be far better to have my mare going for the stable. The public will back *The Turk*, and Mr. Fairfield is one of the

straightest goers we have. There need be no crooked business. If Lobelia can beat him or run him close with 9 stone up she's a certainty. We can back her, and the public can back The Turk. As Fairfield doesn't bet much it won't hurt him."

"We must let Mr. Fairfield know I fancy Lobelia. He needn't hear about the trial, but he ought to have a hint," said Marlow.

"Don't you be a fool," said Rushton. "If you tell Fairfield he'll blab the whole thing. Let him alone. He'll not lose much, and if he does it won't hurt him. He's rich enough for half a dozen people. I'll lay you a stiff bit to nothing about my mare, and we can go to evens for a certainty if the trial comes off all right."

"We'll have the trial anyway, and then I'll see," said Marlow. "So far I'll only place The Turk at your disposal for the gallop, and you will know better than to mention the result."

So the affair was arranged and the result awaited anxiously.

A few mornings after the above conversation three horses appeared at the gates at Randwick just as they were opened at the dawn of day.

It was a grand morning for a gallop, and the going was excellent.

Not a soul was present. It was an off morning, and the public kept away, besides it was too long before the Cup for the touts to pay any attention. There were no other trainers present with their charges, and everything seemed to favour a quiet gallop.

Rushton and Marlow watched the horses being prepared for the trial, and the former said :

"I suppose these fellows have no idea of the weights."

He alluded to the lads who were about to ride.

"No," said Marlow, "they are all stable lads, but can ride well. I thought it safer than getting a crack jockey for the purpose, but if the trial comes off as we hope I'd advise you to retain Lambton for Lobelia. I like him, and he's straight."

"Very well," said Rushton, "these lads will do as they are told this morning, and I don't suppose they'll think it's more than an ordinary trial."

"Not them," said Marlow. "Bless you, they'll care very little about the affair. That chap on The Turk will do his level best to win, he's so devilish proud of his mount. The lad on Lobelia will try and beat him because there is a little rivalry between 'em."

"You've arranged it all pat, I see," laughed Rushton.

The horses went down to the post for their two-mile spin.

The orders were for Prince Rupert to come right away, and the other two to make the best possible haste home.

The day was breaking, and a beautiful flood of light struggled across the course, battling with the mist. It was difficult to see at the far side, but there was no fear of any accident.

The horses went away well together, and Prince Rupert was first to break the line. He went to the front at a rare pace. As they flashed past Rushton and Marlow they saw the mare was going stride for stride with The Turk.

"She's moving splendidly," said Marlow. "I only hope she'll keep it up."

"They're going at a deuce of a pace," said Rushton.

Half a mile from home Prince Rupert shot his bolt, and his tail gave notice he was in distress. The Turk was about a length in front of the mare, both going well.

On they came, the two lads riding like little demons. The whips were out, and the finish was evidently going to be severe.

"The mare'll win," said Rushton, excitedly.

"By Jove, she will," said Marlow.

Nearer and nearer. They were now neck and neck. Lobelia got up a stride more. She responded to every call, and as they passed the eager watchers she just got home by a bare half length.

Rushton with difficulty restrained his joy.

"It's a moral," he said. "It's the biggest certainty I ever knew, Marlow."

"I reckon there's no mistake about that," said Marlow. "I put 8 stone 12 lb. each up instead of 9 stone. It looks better."

"If she can beat The Turk at that weight she's worth backing for a fortune," said Rushton.

"She is, but don't you be in a hurry. Let the public get well on to The Turk before we commence to operate. The odds will be good. And, Mr. Rushton, you can back that mare to win the Sydney Cup for all the money in the market. I've seen many good trials, but I never saw one to beat that!" Lobelia and The Turk looked as though they had had enough of it, but considering the pace and the finish it was not to be wondered at. The lads were satisfied with their performances, and the severe tussle seemed to have made them friends. Marlow unsaddled the horses, and as he did so handed the saddles to Rushton. "Take some of the weight out of Lobelia's," he whispered; "there's no telling how fly these kids are."

Rushton did it quietly. He was used to these things. He slipped the weight into his heavy coat pocket.

The horses were wiped down and the saddles replaced.

The lads mounted, and Marlow on his cob accompanied them to the stables.

Rushton drove back to town in a well-satisfied frame of mind.

He felt the game was safe. He could win a fortune over Lobelia and beat Standish and all the crew.

One of the winkers on the horse appeared to have something wrong with it, and he got out to put it right.

"Beastly weight these things are," he muttered, as he felt the leads heavy in his pocket. "They're no good much; I'll pitch 'em away. He took them out and flung them over the fence, where they landed in some long grass near a bush.

"That's better," he said, as he got into the buggy again.

Had he known where those leads had fallen he would have felt inclined to say "That's worse."

The leads fell upon something soft, something uncommonly like a human form. They did not fall lightly but with a dull thud.

"What yer up to?" muttered the mass of clothes. "If yer hit me agin I'll go for yer. Here, hold on," and the speaker raising himself gazed around in search of an imaginary opponent.

A bleary red face, bloated and swelled after a debauch. Shaggy hair and dirty hands. No mistake about it. It was Blossom Squirm.

"Well, here's a go," said that worthy. "Blest if I didn't dream someone was a punching of me."

At that moment the Turk, Lobelia and Prince Rupert passed, and Blossom saw them. Like many men of his class, Blossom knew the principal racehorses well, and also the trainers.

He at once recognised Marlow, and then Lobelia.

"Bloo'me if that ain't The Turk," he muttered.

"Wonder what time it is? I must have slept 'ere 'alf the night. D—— that booze of Joe's, it were strong. What they been up to? Trial! Too soon for the Cup. What'll t'old ooman say? 'If you go for to see Joe at Randwick,' says she to me, 'blest if ye'll ever get home same night.' Joe keeps powerful good spirits. I knows I feel dead drunk a-coming down here, and turned in. Ain't it cold? Oh, no. Wish I'd a booze. Hallo, what's this?"

He picked up one of the leads and looked at it carefully. It was close beside him. He turned it over all ways. The survey seemed to puzzle him. Suddenly his face brightened.

"This is the bloomin' thing that must have hit me," he said. "Couldn't a hit me if someone hadn't throw'd it. Who throw'd it?"

He scratched his shaggy head meditating:

"Couldn't 'ave been throw'd away for nixy. I've hit it. Marlow's been a emptying the saddles so as the lads shouldn't know the weight. Cunning beggar, Marlow. Wonder if there's more leads about? He felt around. When he had got the others he felt there must be about eight or ten pounds weight. I'll just keep 'em," he said. "I'll make enquiries into this 'ere thing. I'm on a good lay, I fancy. But how could Marlow throw 'em away here. The lads would have seen him. What if my old pal, Dick Rushton, were out with 'em. D—— me, I've got it. They must ha' been throw'd afore the 'osses went past. Rushton an' some on 'em must have gone ahead in a buggy and throw'd 'em out. I'll have a look."

He scrambled to his feet, placed the weights in his pocket, and got over the fence. He could easily see the

marks of buggy wheels and a horse's feet on the still damp dust, which lay thick on the roadway.

He plodded along the road with a countenance expressive of joy. He felt he had hit upon "summat mighty hot," as he put it. Reasoning the matter out in his cunning way, he very nearly hit upon the correct solution. He meant, however, to make quite sure. Blossom was known as a "stable hanger-on" amongst his other occupations. If seen about Marlow's premises he would probably be asked by a stable hand to do some little bit of business for him in the city, or to take a pal a message. He determined to fossick around Marlow's stable at an early date, and glean what he could.

"When the old ooman hears about this she'll call me a fool. Women is dense."

Mrs. Squirm might be dense, but Blossom was cute enough for the pair. When he arrived home he was soundly rated. He made excuses, and at last in desperation pulled the weights out of his pocket and put them on the table.

"There," he said with pride, "that's summat to stop out for."

Mrs. Squirm examined the leads carefully.

"Blossom, you're a hass," she said at last. "Put 'em away. Lumps of lead ain't any good to me."

"Missus, you're a ignoramus. Them lumps of lead will turn to gold afore long," he replied.

"Go and lie down and sleep it 'orf, Blossom," she said. "Your brain ain't in a fit state to argify." Blossom went off chuckling, but he carefully put the leads back into his pocket, which caused Mrs. S. to remark that he was "top heavy enough without putting in ballast."

When the lads who had ridden in the trial reached Marlow's stable they quickly put the horses to-rights,

and the trainer having seen all straight went to his breakfast in high good humour.

"Say, Bill," said the rider of The Turk, "I'd a big weight up, I'll bet."

"So'd I," was the reply: "but I didn't carry it all 'ome with me."

"How d'yer know?" said Turk's jockey.

"Cause I ain't a fool. The boss handed the saddle to Mr. Rushton, and I saw him take something out. I looked under Lobelia's belly at him."

"The devil yer did!"

"Yes; straight. I'm a goin' to have my bit on th' mare for th' Cup."

From which it would appear that Blossom would have capital ground to work on when he paid a visit to Marlow's stables.

CHAPTER XXII.

GOING FOR A RECOVERY.

THE weights for the Sydney Cup were looked forward to with great interest. The best horses in the colony were entered, and also several of a very inferior class. When the handicap was published there was some grumbling, as usual, but as a whole it was considered the handicapper had put them very well together. Lobelia had 8stone 10lb. and The Turk 9stone 12lb. Testator came well out of it with 7stone 10lb., and The Outlaw was down the list with 6stone 5lb.

When Rushton saw the impost his mare had received he was jubilant, and well he might be, considering she had beaten The Turk in her trial. If ever there was a moral for a race Lobelia looked one, and Rushton meant to plunge heavily on her and go for a recovery, for he had lost a heap of money lately.

Marlow considered the mare the best of good things. He was undecided what to do with regard to Mr. Fairfield, the owner of The Turk. He wished to let him know that Lobelia could win, and yet he did not see his way clear. Rushton was very determined about the matter, and swore not a soul should know the result of the trial. The public at once plunged on The Turk, and made him a hot favourite from the moment the weights appeared.

The generality of betting men like to back a good performer, and do not look at the weight so much as the horse. Five to one was the best price about The Turk, and the books would lay Lobelia freely at fifteens, believing the favourite was the stable horse. Testator was backed occasionally at long shots, but The Outlaw was never even mentioned, and the majority of punters were probably unaware there was such a horse in the race.

No genuine move had, however, been made as yet, but as time went on the market became more settled. Rushton had managed to get several thousands about Lobelia without making the odds against her much shorter.

At Yeronga, where Testator, The Outlaw, Coal Queen and a couple more were being schooled, the progress of Rolf's favourite was watched with much interest.

Testator was doing splendid work, and he looked so well that Rolf was sanguine of pulling off the race with

him. Coal Queen was practising at the jumps, to which she took kindly. The Outlaw was almost neglected, although he generally accompanied Testator in his work.

Dave Hilton kept his own counsel, but he still fancied he should get a race out of the despised colt, although the Sydney Cup might be too high game to fly at.

"What do you think of Testator now, Hilton?" said Rolf, to the trainer, one morning after exercise.

"He's going remarkably well, and with 7stone 10lb. ought to run a great horse."

"I hope he will, Hilton," said Tilly, "for I have set my mind on seeing him win the Sydney Cup."

"Don't think much of The Outlaw's chance, do you?" said Nat Smiley.

The unfortunate colt was a standing joke against Dave, but he replied good-humouredly:

"I think more of him than anyone else. Perhaps the Sydney Cup is a little beyond him, but I expect he'll win a race or two."

"Persevere," said Rolf. "By the bye, Nat, I sent down a commission to back Testator, and we ought to get a decent price. A couple of hundred on at twenties will give us a nice win."

"Wonder what Marlow's stable are up to. They've The Turk and Lobelia in. The former's a hot favourite, but I shouldn't wonder if Rushton and the rest go for the mare. She's well handicapped at 8stone 10lb., but I don't fancy she can give Testator a stone," said Nat.

"I'm sure she can't," said Hilton. "Take my word for it, if they win the Cup it will be with The Turk. He's a grand horse, and one of the gamest ever looked through a bridle."

The Hon. Robert Briscoe had given his consent to

Tilly's marriage with Rolf, when the Sydney Cup race was over. He said it was quite soon enough for him to part with her. Rolf, however, informed him that it would be merely changing her name, not parting with her, because Briscoe would have to reside at Yeronga with them. Their life at Yeronga was quiet and pleasant, and there was very little to break the harmony and good-will prevailing there. No shadow had been cast across the old place at present. All was bright and cheerful, and no ominous signs were in the air.

Tilly found ample time to amuse herself, and she took an especial interest in Coal Queen's progress over the sticks.

Nat Smiley paid frequent visits to Melrose Creek, and was always welcomed there. He had imparted to the "boys," as he called them, the secret of the Cup, namely, that Testator would win, and the jolly miners all meant Rolf's horse to carry a bit of their coin. "The Lucky Digger" was indeed a mine of wealth, and it was considered the richest silver claim in the colony.

Matters progressed favourably until it wanted only a fortnight to the Sydney Cup.

Richard Rushton entered Tattersall's rooms about ten o'clock, and there was a fair amount of betting going on. His movements were anxiously watched, for it was felt he knew more than he cared to tell, and the ring had felt to their cost more than once that he was a dangerous man.

"Back The Turk, Mr. Rushton?" said one book-maker with a heavy volume on the race.

"No thanks," said Rushton. "What price can you lay so and so," and he named two or three horses.

"What about my mare then?" he said.

"Can't lay more than 12's. She's been backed for a fair amount already."

"That's a short figure. We shall have to put a saver on her. The Turk will about win, though," said Rushton.

"He must run a good horse," was the reply; "but I've often seen favourites even better than he is go down," said the penciller.

"You can book me twelve ponies about the mare," said Rushton, as he entered it in his book.

It was the first wager he had personally made about the mare, but he stood to win a big stake on her, his commission having been well and secretly executed.

He meant to take twenty or thirty thousand out of the ring this time if possible.

The Turk's position in the market was not firm. He went up and down a good deal in the betting. Mr. Fairfield could not make this out, and questioned Marlow about it.

The trainer was reticent, but explained that the money going on the other horses caused the odds to fluctuate against the favourite.

"He'll win, I think, sir," was generally the wind up, and as that was all Mr. Fairfield wished, he generally left the stable much satisfied.

No horse went better on the track than The Turk, but there were several knowing ones who watched Lobelia with interest.

"Blossom" Squirm was a constant attendant on the track in the mornings. He had paid a visit to Marlow's stable, and pumped the lads dry. He managed to extract the information that Lobelia and The Turk had a go, and that the mare had some weights taken out of the saddle. He kept his own counsel about finding the

leads, but came to the conclusion that Lobelia and The Turk must have had a go at about evens, and that looked good for the mare.

"Blossom" had improved in appearance. He was in funds, and had set up a bran new suit. He meant to augment his capital by a few judicious investments on Lobelia.

The Yeronga horses came down about ten days before the race, in charge of Hilton. Testator was eagerly scanned, and the general opinion was favourable, so much so that he advanced in the betting considerably.

Nat Smiley and Rolf also arrived in Sydney, and Tilly and her father were to come during the next week.

Rolf and his mate were out at the course one morning and saw Rushton there. He scowled at them, but did not speak.

Blossom was as usual on the watch, and he happened to stand close by Rolf and Smiley. He heard Hilton address the latter as Nat Smiley, which caused him to prick up his ears.

"Whew!" he whistled, softly; "that's curious. Same name as the lady at our place. Suppose he should be her husband. Holy moley, what a game. I've made a discovery. I must take particular notice of this man. He'll come in useful, I reckon. He'd make short work of Mr. Rushton, from the looks of him. Wonder if he knows all about it?"

Testator came striding past at the moment, in company with The Outlaw and Coal Queen.

"Moves well," said Nat; "he ought to make 'em gallop on the day."

Lobelia came round with Prince Rupert, and the mare

glided over the ground with a sweeping stride that could not but be admired.

"She'll run well. That beggar's in luck this time," muttered Nat. "I'd just give a few hundreds to see him get a knock. I've heard a whisper that he's backing the mare, and the public The Turk. There'll be some discreditable work, or it will be out of Rushton's style."

"Perhaps they'll run on their merits," said Rolf. "I understand Fairfield's a straight goer, and does not bet."

"He may be," said Nat; "but the other fellow isn't, and you bet he knows to an ounce what chance his mare has."

Rushton, as may be guessed, watched Testator eagerly, and he had to confess with grim wrath that the horse looked well. But Lobelia's trial was good enough to beat any amount of horses like Testator.

He plunged deeper and deeper, and the weight of money on Lobelia caused her to be an almost equal favourite with her stable mate, The Turk.

The public could not understand it at all. They jumped to the conclusion that Lobelia was being forced in the market in order that The Turk might be backed at longer odds. As usual, their surmises were incorrect.

Rolf was strolling down Pitt Street a couple of nights after he arrived in Sydney, when his attention was attracted by a huge poster on the wall announcing that Maude Bradley, the famous burlesque actress, lately arrived from London, would appear at Her Majcsty's on Saturday next.

Now, there was nothing particularly noticeable about this announcement, and yet Rolf stood looking at the notice for a few minutes.

"First nights used to be the correct thing at home," he thought; "I'll go and book seats for the lot." He

went into the vestibule at the theatre, and secured four seats in a prominent position in the circle.

"The booking's sure to be heavy," said the box office official.

"Is she a great actress?" said Rolf.

"Supposed to be the loveliest woman on the London stage," was the reply. "I've caught a glimpse of her, and she is splendid. She'll create a sensation."

"I'll judge for myself," said Rolf, with a smile. "Paint and powder makes a lot of difference, you know. She may be very nice behind the footlights, but not quite so attractive in the light of day."

Rolf walked out, but do what he would he could not get Maude Bradley out of his mind. He glanced into a music shop and there saw a portrait of a magnificent woman. It was a full-length portrait above the ordinary size. It was Maude Bradley's.

What made him start as he looked at it?

"Great Heavens, how like!" he said to himself.

He riveted his eyes on the picture. It dazzled him.

A beautiful woman clad like an Amazon. But the face. Could it be possible? The likeness was extraordinary. The resemblance to his sister was remarkable.

"So like Maude," he said. "Same name, too. How strange. What on earth possesses me to constantly think about this woman?"

He looked at the picture until he felt almost ashamed. He walked on but came back again to the shop as though some magnetic attraction drew him there.

When he reached home he told Nat of the curious coincidence.

Smiley laughed as he said:

"I'll tell you what it is, Rolf. Tilly won't relish your

falling in love with the photograph of a burlesque actress. Come, old fellow, I thought you'd got past that silly age when a painted actress could hold your heart enthralled."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Rolf. "I tell you the face is the very image of my sister. The features are almost the same. Of course it isn't her, but it's the most curious resemblance I ever saw. I am eager for Saturday's performance. Perhaps it is merely a flattering photo, and the original may be unlike."

"When you see your Venus on the stage the illusion will be dispelled," said Nat. "I've often noticed striking resemblances to people I have known when looking in a photographer's window, but in nearly every instance I have found out I was mistaken."

Maude Bradley had arrived in Sydney, and was to appear at Her Majesty's. She little knew what a sensation she had caused in Rolf's mind. Brother and sister—so near, and yet so far apart. Her name was in everyone's mouth. Her fame had preceded her. The management had decided she should appear in *Love's Own Land*, the burlesque she created such excitement in at the Alcazar. A powerful company had been got together to support her, and her début was looked forward to with interest.

Strange working of fate. Lord Studley had been appointed *aide de camp* to the Governor of N.S.W., and had arrived in the colony by the P and O. boat.

Was he fascinated with her, and had he obtained the appointment on her account? He would have flouted the idea had anyone suggested such a thing, and yet he could not help knowing he had a great interest in her. She was different from other women of her class. She had never worn that hateful costume again since he had

requested her not to do so. He was anxious to see whether she would appear in it at Her Majesty's.

His Excellency had intimated his intention of being present at the opening performance, and Maude Bradley had noticed with a thrill of pleasure the announcement that Lord Studley had been appointed to the post of *aide de camp*.

Then he would be there. It would be like the old time in London. It would give her courage. She would not wear the dress he had requested her to discard.

Little did she know what shame that decision was to spare her. Had she appeared in it, and Rolf Standish seen her, he would have thought her hopelessly lost to all sense of decency. Fate works strangely. It was evident Maude Bradley's first appearance in Sydney was to be eventful.

Rolf was not the only one who had been attracted by the photograph of Maude Bradley.

Richard Rushton had started and turned pale when he first saw it. He looked at the Amazon Queen even longer than Rolf. He saw the remarkable resemblance to the girl he had so deeply wronged. He trembled, coward that he was, as he gazed at it. Impossible, it could not be Maude Standish, and yet how like.

"Curse the thing," he muttered. "I must go and see her," and he, too, booked a seat for the first night.

Rushton could not get that face out of his mind. It haunted him. He felt that some dire calamity was about to happen. He was harassed enough already, and now this infernal Maude Bradley with her fatal likeness to the other Maude had come to disturb his peace.

Blossom Squirm had demanded more money, and got

it. Marlow had played the very devil, and threatened to throw up the job if Rushton did not consent to let Mr. Fairfield be "in the swim." He had backed his mare for more money than he dared to think of. He was indeed "going for a recovery."

The net was closing upon Richard Rushton. His sins, like the chickens, were coming home to roost. A more miserable man did not walk the streets of Sydney. Rushton was a scoundrel, but he lacked one great essential to make him successful—he was an arrant coward, and, what's more, he knew it. Maude Bradley's first appearance was likely to be fraught with an interest she little dreamt off.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

HER Majesty's Theatre was crowded from gallery to stalls to witness the début in Australia of Maude Bradley. There was a large and fashionable assemblage in the circle, and His Excellency the Governor and suite were present. The house was brimming over with excitement, and there was intense eagerness for the curtain to be raised.

Rolf Standish and party occupied seats with a full view of the stage, and Richard Rushton was not far behind them.

Three men in that vast house awaited the rising of the

curtain with more than ordinary interest. They were Rolf Standish, Richard Rushton, and Lord Studley. Each had a certain amount of interest in the new actress, and yet their feelings were of a very different nature.

Rolf had not told Tilly of the remarkable resemblance he fancied Maude Bradley bore to his sister, and as he sat next to her in deep thought she fancied he must have something on his mind.

"What is the matter with you to-night, Rolf," she said, "you seem quite dull."

"Oh, nothing, Tilly," he replied. "I must say I do feel a little depressed, but one cannot help being so at times. I have no doubt it will pass off quickly after the curtain is raised and we get into the fun of the piece."

At last! The curtain went up amid expectant silence. The burlesque commenced and the audience were at once satisfied. No expense had been spared in the production.

When Maude Bradley appeared on the stage there was a perfect roar of applause, which shook the theatre. Cheer after cheer was given, and she had repeatedly to bow her acknowledgments.

The warmth of the reception seemed quite to unnerve her, but she finally braced up and her face glowed with pardonable pride.

Rolf at the moment she appeared was speaking in a low tone to Mr. Briscoe. He raised his glasses and looked at the beautiful woman on the stage.

Suddenly she stepped forward and faced the house.

With an exclamation distinctly audible, Rolf let the glasses fall from his hands.

"Great heavens!" he muttered, "how like; and yet it cannot be her."

Tilly heard the strange words, and looked at him with wonderment plainly depicted in her eyes.

"Are you ill, Rolf," she said, anxiously. "What made you start so? Why did you utter those strange words?"

The people close round them were staring at Rolf in amazement.

Rolf seemed half stupified. He could not speak for a few moments.

At last Briscoe said :

"Come, man, what's the matter? Speak out and tell me."

"That woman. Maude Bradley. She's the living image of my sister. By what chance does she come here?"

"Nonsense, man, you're dreaming," said Briscoe.

"Hush!" said Rolf, as Maude Bradley commenced to sing.

That voice! How it thrilled through him. He no longer doubted now. It must be his sister. And yet how changed! A burlesque actress! He shuddered.

"Can this be true, Rolf?" said Tilly, looking earnestly at him.

"It must be," said Rolf, "if I do not dream. But I will soon find out," and he rose as though to go.

"Are you mad?" said Briscoe as he pulled him back into the seat. "If it be your sister, and you go to see her now, you will so agitate her she will not be able to finish the performance, and it would cause a sensation, which I am sure you do not wish to provoke."

"You're right," said Rolf, with a groan. "I must wait until the end."

When Richard Rushton saw Maude Bradley on the stage he recognised her at once. He watched Rolf and saw the start he gave, and it confirmed any lingering doubts he might have possessed.

"What devil's game brought her here," he muttered. "She'll spoil all. If Rolf were not here I might turn her to good account. She's evidently a star and therefore must have money. But that confounded brother will spoil my chance. By Jove, how handsome she is. I almost wish I had never left her. She's worth a hundred such countrified girls as Tilly Briscoe. And to think I possessed all those charms once. Well, that's over. Of course he'll go and see her and she'll tell him all. Will she? I hardly think so. She's too proud. She'll conceal that little episode in her past life or I am much mistaken. If she does tell him"—Rushton's face fell at the mere thought of what Rolf would do in such a case.

Lord Studley had also noticed with pleasure that Maude Bradley's costume was quite correct, and he had fancied she had given him a glance of recognition.

At the end of the first act Rolf asked Tilly to excuse him for a few moments and he went out with Briscoe, leaving Nat Smiley in charge of her.

They passed into the vestibule and Rolf asked to see the manager.

"Could I see Miss Bradley after the performance before she leaves the theatre," he said. "It is of the utmost importance to her that I should do so."

The manager smiled. He was familiar with such requests from good-looking rich young men of Rolf's class,

"I hardly think she will see anyone, she is a stranger here, you know," said the manager.

"I assure you it is necessary," said Briscoe.

The manager seemed irresolute, but at last said :

"Will you give me your card?"

"Certainly. But do not give it her until the performance is over," said Rolf. "If my surmises are correct it might startle her too much."

The manager elevated his eyebrows. This was quite an unlooked-for situation.

"In that case," he said, "perhaps I had better not deliver your message at all."

Rolf took the manager on one side, and spoke to him in an undertone.

"There certainly is a resemblance," he said, as he glanced into Rolf's face. "It will be strange if she is your sister. I will deliver your card myself. Rolf Standish, of the Lucky Digger Mine, I believe," he continued, respectfully.

"I am," said Rolf.

"You have been very fortunate, sir, in your speculations," said the manager.

"We have," replied Rolf. He did not care to talk about his private affairs.

"You've got a horse in the Sydney Cup, run next week, I believe," said the manager.

"Yes, I've got a horse in it—in fact a couple," said Rolf, smiling.

"Going to win?" said the manager with a nod of the head.

"If I can," said Rolf.

"Worth backing?" said the manager.

"I think so," said Rolf.

"Thanks, I'll have a bit on," was the reply.

"Don't forget the note," said Rolf.

"Come and write it in my office," said the manager. Rolf went in and wrote a few brief lines, enclosing his card.

"There, that will do," he said, as he handed it to the manager.

"I will take it myself," said that worthy

As Rolf and Briscoe went upstairs they met Rushton coming down, and he passed them with a nod, which was barely returned.

"Eh! you," said Rushton, as he saw a lad come out of the office of the manager.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him I wish to speak to him," said Rushton.

The lad disappeared and the manager came out.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Rushton, is it. Well, what do you think of our new star?"

"A deuced fine woman," said Rushton. "Fancy, I've met her in London. By the bye, could you have a note sent round to her from me?"

The manager thought for a moment. Two requests preferred so suddenly. Strange, he considered.

"Come," said Rushton, "you've had it done before; do it again. It's most important."

"I'll give her your name," said the manager.

"That'll do," said Rushton. "Tell her I'll call at her hotel. No, on second thoughts I won't. Never mind about it. I'll see her myself."

"Very well, Mr. Rushton. But not to-night."

"No, not to-night," said Rushton. "I'll not go in again. I'm sick of burlesque. I told you when I'd got a good thing I'd tell you to back it. You have a bit on The Turk," said Rushton, and he went out with a grin on his face. He couldn't even tell the manager, who

had done him more than one good turn, the correct horse to back.

"Curious those two fellows should want to see her," said the manager. "Well, I like Mr. Standish's looks and I hope it's correct what he says. It'll be a good job for a beauty like her to have a brother to look after her out here."

Meantime the burlesque was being continued. Tilly was delighted with it, and even Rolf thought that after all his sister might have decided to adopt the stage in order to be independent, and he knew she always had a taste for acting. This pacified him somewhat, and he enjoyed the piece, although he was anxious for it to end. He explained to Tilly what he intended to do, and she quite approved of it.

"I hope she is your sister," said Tilly. "How I shall love her. But if she is not, no flirting behind the scenes," she added, playfully.

"I promise," said Rolf, laughing. "But I have little doubts on the subject. I could hardly be so mistaken."

The performance came to an end at last, and Rolf having seen the trio safely leave the theatre waited anxiously for the manager.

He came round presently, evidently excited.

"She's almost fainted," he gasped. "Your note had a most extraordinary effect upon her or I should have been here before."

"She will see me then?" said Rolf, eagerly.

"Yes, she wishes you to come at once," said the manager. "Most extraordinary occurrence," he muttered.

When the manager gave Maude Bradley Rolf's note she took it quite unconcernedly. She was accustomed

to receive *billets doux*, and she fancied that it might be from Lord Studley.

She started as she looked at the handwriting, and opened it hurriedly.

"Dearest Maude," it commenced. "If you are my sister let me come and welcome you to-night. We have been separated too long. What strange chance has brought you hither? If you are not my sister pardon the familiarity of my address, and decline to see me. Your loving brother, Rolf Standish."

Maude let the letter fall from her hand. She sank down on a couch, and the manager fancied she had fainted. He offered her assistance, but she declined it.

"Wait a moment," she said. "Let me think."

"How could she meet Rolf," she thought. "What would he think of her? Should she tell him all? No, a thousand times, no. She must lead him to believe she had adopted the stage as a means of earning an independent living, and she knew him well enough to feel he would not despise but applaud her for it. But to tell him of her fall. To let that dear brother know that she had been the dupe of such a man as Rushton, she could not do it. He need never know. It would be better for them both. Much better for him."

She turned to the manager and said, with a smile :

"This is a strange chance. This letter is from my brother. Let him come round at once."

The manager smiled. He was delighted.

How Maude's heart beat as she waited for Rolf to come. "Would he be much changed? How was he getting on in the world? Would he be the same loving brother to her!"

These thoughts flashed quickly through her mind. The door of the room opened.

Rolf entered quickly. For one moment he looked at the beautiful woman before him. Then he said :

"Maude. My own dear sister."

She was in his arms in a moment. Proud Maude Bradley cried with joy.

"Oh, Rolf, is it really you?" she said as she turned her tear-stained face to his.

"Yes, Maude. It's your own brother, Rolf," he said, as he kissed her fondly. "How on earth did you come out here? But I expect it's a long story," he said, "and you are too tired to tell me now."

"It's a long story, Rolf," she replied with a sigh. "But you shall hear it all to-morrow."

"Where are you staying?" he said.

"I have rooms at the Royal Hotel."

"You must come and put up at our hotel to-morrow," said Rolf.

"Our hotel!" said Maude, with surprise.

Rolf almost blushed as he said :

"Yes, our hotel, Maude. I have a sister that is to be to show you."

Maude drew back quickly. Was she fit to touch a pure, good girl.

Rolf looked pained. "What's the matter, Maude?" he asked.

"It will be better for me to remain at the Royal for a time," she said hurriedly. "You see, an actress's position is a difficult one, and people will talk."

"As you please," laughed Rolf. "And what an actress you are, Maude. I was quite proud of you to-night, and Tilly thought you lovely, and hoped she would find in you a sister."

"Heaven bless her," said Maude. "I suppose Tilly is the one," she added.

"The dearest girl in the world," said Rolf.

"Not excepting me," said Maude, archly.

"Not excepting you," replied Rolf.

"And you really think that I am a good actress?" she asked.

"Splendid," said Rolf. "But then I am not a fair judge. Wait and see what the critics say."

"Oh, never mind them. I've been slated enough already," said Maude.

"Been what?" said Rolf, half amused.

"Slated. That's the correct term, I believe," said Maude, with a smile. "But we had better go now. The manager will be tired of waiting."

They left the theatre together, and Rolf saw his sister to her hotel, and remained a short time. He kissed her tenderly as he left, and said he would call next morning with Tilly and hear the story of her stage career.

Maude when left to herself felt she hardly knew how. She was pleased to meet Rolf. He was the same kind, affectionate brother as of old. But what was she that she should come in contact with Tilly Briscoe. She would see what Tilly was like, and if a girl after her own heart, Maude determined to tell her the real truth, and let her choose if she would be a sister to her. But of one thing she was determined, Richard Rushton's name should never cross her lips.

The manager of Her Majesty's pondered over things as he walked homewards. "Strange," he muttered. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to write a drama and here's the material for a sensation at hand. I'll have a shy at it." Candidly, he had "had a shy at it" on a score different occasions, and had never had a play read, so his chances of success were not hopeful. As he passed Tattersall's a bookmaker of his acquaintance

bid him good-night. He suddenly thought of the tips he had received, and asked what horses Standish had in the Sydney Cup.

"He's only one in," said the bookmaker.

"He told me he had two in," was the reply.

"Let's have a look. Blessed if I know. Come inside," and they went into the rooms.

The bookmaker glanced down the list.

"Only one," he said. "Oh, perhaps this is his other. The Outlaw, entered in Hilton's name. That's his trainer."

"He said he had a good chance of winning, but didn't name the horse."

"Testator's the one. The other brute's at fifty to one and hasn't a hundred to one show. I doubt if he'll start."

"I'll have a pound on Testator, then," said the manager.

"All right £8 to £1," and he booked it.

"What'll you lay me the other one?" said the manager.

"Oh, any price. Don't fool your money away. If you weren't a friend I wouldn't tell you that," said the bookmaker.

"But I want a bit on him. D—— it, I like the name," said the manager.

"Like the name, do you," laughed the bookmaker. "I'll tell you what I'll do, then. I'll bet you a pony to a couple of passes for the theatre to-morrow night that the Outlaw can't win the Sydney Cup."

"Done," said the manager, and he wrote out the order. And that was about the extent of the investments which had been made on David Hilton's nomination, The Outlaw.

CHAPTER XXIV

TESTATOR EXALTED.

TRUE to his promise, Rolf called next morning to see his sister, and Tilly accompanied him.

Maude received them with every mark of affection, and as she looked in Tilly's clear, frank blue eyes she could not but acknowledge Rolf had made a wise choice.

There was something about Tilly Briscoe's manner which at once put Maude at ease with her, and before the "squatter's daughter" had been in her company half an hour she felt the country-bred girl could be trusted with any secret she might wish to impart.

Maude rapidly sketched the history of her stage career. She said she was tired of being a burden upon her relations, although they were very kind to her, and she went up to London much against their wish and took to the stage. She related with pride how she had become a successful actress, and with a pleading look at Rolf trusted he would not blame her for what she had done.

Then she spoke of her acquaintance with Lord Studley, and how kind he had been to her, and so different from other men of rank who had tried to lay their fortunes at her feet. It was with some bitterness she alluded to the temptations she had encountered, and the persecutions and annoyances she had suffered. At the conclusion of her story Rolf took her hands, and looking into her face kissed her tenderly as he said :

"My poor Maude. All the more credit to you for coming through such great temptations pure and inno-

cent. But what else could I expect from my own dear sister, and a Standish."

Maude felt guilty, and for a moment did not speak.

Tilly had watched every movement of her face, and saw the pained look which flashed across it as Rolf spoke.

"She has suffered more than she would tell," thought Tilly. "I wish I could help her."

Maude also saw the look of sympathy Tilly gave her, and that strengthened her in the resolve to tell her all.

Rolf said he would leave Tilly with her for the remainder of the morning, and they could all meet at luncheon. He had an engagement at Tattersall's Club which he must keep.

"Oh, yes," said Tilly. "You must know, Maude—I shall always call you Maude now—may I?" she asked with a winning smile.

"Yes, Tilly. How nice that name sounds," said Maude.

"Well, you must know," said Tilly, "that dear old Rolf has a horse engaged in the Sydney Cup, and he's going down to Tattersall's to back it, put some more cash on, he'd say, the naughty man."

"You must have done well out here, Rolf," said Maude.

"Done well," said Tilly. "He's rich. So awfully rich I'm half afraid of him. He's part owner of the 'Lucky Digger Mine,' and Yeronga Station. But I'll tell you all about it when he's gone. He's too modest to do it himself even to his own sister. Now, not a word, sir. Go about your business," said Tilly, with a stamp of her foot at Rolf.

"I've no doubt you'll sing my praises loud enough, Tilly," he said. "But don't forget your father, who first gave me a helping hand when I was nearly starving, and

who made me a present of the Sydney Cup winner that is to be, Testator."

"No more," said Tilly, "or you will spoil my yarn."

Rolf went, leaving them alone together.

Tilly at once plunged in her random fashion into the history of Rolf's adventures, and Maude could not help smiling at the glowing account she gave of his perfections.

"There, I've done," said Tilly. "Isn't he a real, good fellow? He's the dearest, best old Rolf that ever was. But don't you tell him. It might spoil him."

"I promise," said Maude, laughing. Then she added, seriously :

"Tilly, I have something I want to tell you, but it is for you alone. You must not mention it to Rolf or anyone. I feel it just to you that you should know what I am," said Maude, with a deep sigh.

"Know what you are," said Tilly. "A dear, good Maude. A sister I shall love. I don't care what you are. You are Rolf's sister, that is enough for me."

"No, it is not enough," said Maude. "Listen, Tilly."

"When I told Rolf my history I omitted one thing. When I left my friends I did not go alone," she faltered.

"My poor Maude," said Tilly, as she put her arm around her waist and drew her close to her side.

"Not alone, Tilly. I was tempted and I fell. Oh! it was so hard. He promised to marry me if I would elope with him. I knew his father was rich, and I trusted him to make me his wife. We fled to London. What followed I will not darken your pure nature by telling you. Sufficient to say that he deserted me, and that I am Maude Standish still. What agony I have suffered. What shame I have endured. Heaven knows my sin was great, but my punishment has been heavy.

I nearly starved to death in the streets of London, until, by a lucky chance, I became engaged at the Alcazar ; you know the rest, Tilly. I am not fit to touch you. Oh ! Tilly, if you could only know what I have suffered. But Rolf must never know. It would almost kill him to hear of his sister's shame. He would spurn me from him, and that is more than I could bear. That is why I have not told him all. Do you despise me, Tilly ? " she asked, tearfully.

"Despise you. A thousand times, no. I am not a town-bred lady. They call me forward, and free ; what do I care ? I have a heart, and I can feel for you, Maude. Despise you. Never, sister. You are dearer to me now than you were before."

Maude looked at the noble girl before her, and fairly broke down.

Suddenly Tilly said :

"And the brute who has so badly treated you. What became of him, Maude ? Is he dead ?"

"Don't mention him," said Maude. "I have buried him with my past life. If ever we do meet again he had better beware," and her eyes flashed dangerously.

Tilly comforted Maude as only she could have done, and they were indeed sisters united at heart.

Rolf little thought of the tale Tilly had heard from Maude as he proceeded towards Tattersall's, where he met Nat Smiley and Hilton.

"Something's up," said Nat. "The Turk's gone back to 10's, and Lobelia's first favourite. They've made a dead set against Testator, too. Something's leaked out about Lobelia beating The Turk at level weights. If that's true we've no show."

"That can hardly be possible," said Rolf. "Fairfield would never have let The Turk be at the head of

the betting so long had he known such to be the case."

"But they say he didn't know," said Hilton.

"More of Rushton's dirty work, I suppose," said Nat.

They went inside, and soon found out that The Turk was a "dead 'un," so far as some of the books were concerned.

"Mr. Fairfield's been here in a fearful rage," said a popular penciller. "Swears he knew nothing about the trial, and has ordered Marlow to give up his horse."

"Who'll train him?" said Rolf.

"Blessed if I know," said the bookmaker. "He may leave him in the old stable when he calms down. I don't blame Marlow much, but that beggar Rushton's hit us all round this time."

"Has he much on his mare?" said Rolf.

"Stands to win between 20 and 25,000."

"Whew!" whistled Nat. "He means business this time, at all events."

"Looks a moral for Lobelia," said Hilton; "if the trial's correct."

It did look a moral, and before one o'clock the mare stood at the short odds of 6 to 4.

Rushton came into the rooms, and was greeted with an ominous silence.

"A nice little plant you've worked on us this time, Mr. Rushton," said one bookmaker.

"I fancy I've got the best of the deal," he said.

"Want to hedge any money?" said another.

"Not a shilling," said Rushton. "I mean to have all or nothing this time." Then seeing Rolf, he said: "Can you have another bet, Mr. Standish? I'll lay you a level five hundred my mare beats your horse."

"Which?" said Rolf; "I've two in the race."

"Testator. You know which one well enough, the other brute hasn't a ghost of a show," said Rushton.

"I'm well aware of that," said Rolf, "but I fancied I might just as well know which you meant."

"What do you mean?" said Rushton.

"I mean that if I bet with you, we must perfectly understand the nature of the wager."

"Oh!" said Rushton, with a sneer. "All right, Mr. Particular. I'll bet you a level monkey my mare beats Testator, and I'll give you The Outlaw in with the bet. That's two chances to my one," he said, laughing.

"Considering your mare's at 6 to 4 you'll have much the better of the deal," said Rolf, "but I'll take the wager," and he booked it.

"Halves," said Nat, with a smile.

"Right," said Rolf, "but I'm afraid it's not a good investment this time."

When it became known that Rolf had backed Testator, with The Outlaw thrown in, against Lobelia for a level five hundred, backers fancied he must have had a great trial with Testator, and backed the horse accordingly, until there was only a couple of points between the mare and Rolf's favourite.

Rushton became furious at this, and once more backed Lobelia at short odds.

"Have you anything on Testator, Hilton?" said Nat.

"Only what you've laid me to nothing," he said.

"Well, here's twenty pounds, you can put that on him."

"Thanks," said Hilton, as he put it in his pocket and went up to a bookmaker.

"Have you done it?" said Nat.

"Yes, I've backed our horse," said Hilton.

"I hope he'll win," said Nat.

"So do I," was the reply.

The eve of the Sydney Cup is not so exciting as the night before the great Melbourne event, but still there is quite enough stir to make matters lively. As the time drew near for the great event the betting market became somewhat unsettled.

The Turk gradually came again, and the night before the race the quotations were: 6 to 4 Lobelia, 5 to 1 Testator, 6 to 1 Turk, 10 to 1 Mazeppa and Lucetta, and from 20 to 50 and 100 to 1 the outsiders.

If ever a cup looked a one-horse-race, it did on this occasion for Lobelia.

The news had gradually spread around the city that Maude Bradley, the popular favourite, was Rolf's sister, and when she was constantly seen driving about with Tilly Briscoe the rumour was confirmed.

Rushton had thought better of his determination to see her, and he avoided her as much as possible. He felt safe, so far as Rolf was concerned, as he knew Maude would not tell him of that little episode in which he was connected with her past life.

Blossom Squirm was, however, a sore thorn in Rushton's side, and was constantly bleeding him for money.

He never doubted the unfortunate woman he had so basely ill-treated was dead, and he felt he was in Blossom's power.

If Lobelia won he meant to go to England and leave that horrid memory behind.

"Blossom" was delighted with himself. He had invested on Lobelia at long odds, and like a wise general had hedged, so that he could not lose, but must win, any way. He, however, stood a good stake if the mare got home, and he was naturally anxious about her.

Although "Blossom" was an outcast he was by no

means a bad-hearted man, and consequently poor Mrs. Nevton had a much better time of it since her recovery than she had before.

She could not understand how "Blossom" obtained money from Rushton, but so long as it came in she cared not. She had no desire to see the man who had wronged her, but merely his money. "Blossom" quieted her by stating Rushton had made her a "'ansome" allowance, but didn't wish to see her. He meant to bide his time and play the live Mrs. Smiley as his trump card in his game of chance with Rushton.

"To-morrow will decide our fate," said Briscoe as they chatted about the prospects of the various candidates for the race.

"It won't break us if we lose, that's one consolation," said Rolf.

"No," replied Nat, "but if we win it will put the last nail in Rushton's coffin, or I'm much mistaken."

"Is he as deep in the mud as that?" said Briscoe.

"Yes," replied Nat.

"I don't wish him any harm," said Briscoe, "but I hope he'll lose."

"So do I," said Rolf. "He doesn't deserve to win."

"Here's to Testator," said Briscoe, as he drained his glass.

"Here's to Testator, and may he get home easily," said Nat and Rolf.

And so Testator became exalted, both in the public's and his owner's estimation.

CHAPTER XXV

LOOKS BAD FOR THE FAVOURITE.

STRANGE things may happen in a few hours, and in horseracing startling changes take place rapidly.

The night before the Cup Lobelia was a red-hot favourite, but when Randwick was reached by the majority of people about noon they found that The Turk had supplanted Rushton's mare and now stood first in the betting at 3 to 1, while Lobelia had eased to fours. Even the books could hardly understand this. A lump of money had been put on The Turk during the early hours of the morning. Where it came from no one seemed precisely to know, but the men who had the commissions were trustworthy, and consequently the books had no compunction in laying the wagers. The fact of the matter was Mr. Fairfield, the owner, who seldom went in for betting, had thought better of his tiff with Marlow, and had a confidential chat with that worthy.

Now, Marlow was cunning, and he knew full well that Fairfield was a much better master to trust than Rushton. He could hardly go back on his bargain with Lobelia's owner, and he wished to keep in with Mr. Fairfield. So he wisely fell in with the views of the owner of The Turk, and decided to let matters take their course.

Thus it came about that Mr. Fairfield, who had got the measure of Rushton and his mare, decided he would back The Turk even in face of the trial, just to show the public he had not lost confidence in the Melbourne Cup hero.

Randwick presented a busy scene on the day of the race. The course was crowded, and the lawn and paddock thronged. It was seldom so much interest had been taken over a Sydney Cup. There was an air of mystery about the whole affair which seemed to excite the imagination of the public.

Rushton's character was well known, and so were the incidents in which he had been connected with Rolf Standish and the Briscoes.

When the Yeronga party arrived, accompanied by Maude Standish, known to theatre-goers as the "Queen of Burlesque," they created quite a sensation.

The ladies were anxious to get a look at the beauty who had fascinated all the men on the stage, and had turned out to be the sister of one of the owners of the "Lucky Digger" mine.

She looked at her best, and Rolf felt proud of her as he walked by her side to the stand.

"I'll see how the betting is going," said Nat to Rolf. "I won't be long away, Miss Standish," he went on, with a look of admiration.

When Nat reached the paddock he fancied someone was following him pretty closely. He could not be quite sure, and yet the same man was constantly upon his heels. At last he could doubt no longer, and turning sharply round he said :—

"What the devil do you want following me about? I'll give you in charge if you don't clear off."

The man he addressed was Blossom, who replied meekly enough,

"It's all right, Mr. Smiley, may I have a word or two with you?"

Nat did not know the man, but there were scores of

people who knew the lucky digger with whom he had no acquaintance.

"What do you want?" Nat asked.

"Tell you something of importance. It's particular. Just grant me a minute," said Blossom.

Mr. Squirm had improved considerably in appearance since he had bled Rushton so freely, and had it not been for his bibulous countenance he might have passed for a respectable citizen.

"Come this way," said Nat, as they went a little apart from the crowd. "Now what is it?"

"Lobelia must win the Cup," said Blossom.

"Is that all?" said Nat, with a laugh, "I know all about that."

"No yer don't, beggin' yer pardon," said Blossom.

"I know what the trial was, and I know The Turk's a stiff 'un to-day"

"Why he's first favourite, and Fairfield always runs straight," said Nat.

"Never you mind. It's not Mr. Fairfield. He's right enough, but he'll lose his money. Lobelia is a dead certainty. I'll tell yer why if you'll tip me a bit, Mr. Smiley," said Blossom.

"Oh, that's it, is it," said Nat. "Well, when I want your information I'll ask you for it," and he moved away.

"Don't go, sir," said Blossom, respectfully. "I mean well, indeed I does, but I'm poor. If I don't tell the truth, s'help me I'll die right off."

Nat seemed amused. "I'll humour the beggar," he thought. "No doubt he's a sharp, but it don't matter much." Turning to Blossom, he said, "here's a fiver. Now, what is it?"

"Lobelia beat The Turk at level weights in the trial,

with Prince Rupert to cut out the running," said Blossom in a whisper.

"Bosh," said Nat. "She may be a good 'un, but she couldn't manage that."

In a hurried manner Blossom imparted what he had discovered, and what the reader already knows.

"What made you give me the information?" said Smiley. "It's worth more than a fiver if it's true."

"'Cause I know something about you, and I hate Rushton," said Blossom, with a curse.

"What do you know about me?" said Smiley. "That I'm a lucky digger, I suppose?" he added, with a smile.

Blossom's face underwent a change. The man was not all bad. He'd more chance of a favourable settlement in the next world than Rushton the swell.

"I know what you little think," he whispered. "I know you have more cause to hate Richard Rushton than I have."

Nat looked hard at the man and set his teeth.

"How much do you know?" he hissed.

Blossom feared this man. He knew not why, but he fancied Nat Smiley could be very dangerous.

"I'd rather not say," he said.

"Out with it," said Nat, sternly.

"Well, then, I know Rushton ruined your home, and, what's more——" Blossom halted.

"Go on," came firmly from Smiley's lips.

Blossom had time to collect his wits. He was going to say, "What's more, I know where your wife is," but he answered,

"What's more, Rushton doesn't know you know."

"Ah," said Nat, with a sigh of relief, "then I have him fast."

"I can give him to you faster," said Blossom. "He's bribed Stedman to pull The Turk if Lobelia can win, and he's backed 'em to run first and second."

"Are you mad or is he?" said Nat.

"He may be; I'm not," said Blossom. "You ask the leviathan; he'll tell you. He laid Rushton twenty fives in thousands that Lobelia didn't run first and The Turk second on condition the money was put up, and the villain got it from somewhere."

"This is most extraordinary," said Nat. "I must see Fairfield at once and put him on his guard."

"He won't take no notice," said Blossom. "He'd trust Stedman against any man."

"Then I'll mind my own business," said Nat. "Where can I see you again?" he asked.

"At the Metrop," said Blossom. "I'll meet you there to-morrow night at nine. If what I've told you is not correct you'll know by then."

"I'll be there," said Nat.

"Good-day, sir," said Blossom; "I've backed Lobelia, you do the same, sir."

To say that Nat Smiley was surprised would be but faintly to express his astonishment. What a strange creature this was. He must see Rolf at once. He hurried away, and quickly drew Rolf aside from the ladies and Briscoe. Hurriedly he told him what Blossom had said.

"We must tell Fairfield," said Rolf.

"The man said it would be no use, and that Fairfield trusts Stedman against any man."

"I'll try him. There he is," said Rolf.

He had but a slight knowledge of the owner of The Turk, and it was a delicate subject to broach, but after introducing himself he told him what Nat had said about the jockey.

Mr. Fairfield was an obstinate man with a blind belief in Stedman. He merely said, "I'm much obliged for your information, but it comes too late. I've settled all with Marlow, and The Turk will win if he can. I know now what the trial was, but he's never a good horse on the track. You mean well, no doubt, Mr. Standish, but don't forget, The Turk I am sure is the better of our pair. Good day, sir."

Mr. Fairfield's knowledge was almost identical with Smiley's, so Rolf concluded he must know all. Unfortunately, however, Mr. Fairfield did not know of Rushton's big wager "one, two," and Rolf in the hurry forgot to tell him. He trusted his jockey, but had he heard that the owner of Lobelia had taken such a bet he would have hesitated before placing such blind faith in Stedman.

"We've done all we can," said Rolf to Nat, "and he seems to know as much as we do, and more. It proves, however, that what the man told you is correct. What's the fellow's name?"

"Hang me if I didn't forget to ask him," said Nat. "But I'm to meet him at nine to-morrow night. It's a rum go, anyway."

The race for the Cup was now drawing near, and The Turk became a warmer favourite than ever. There seemed no end of money for him. Rushton, however, kept on backing his mare, and people followed his lead, until at last the favourite eased. Suddenly a heavy betting man shouted out 3 to 1 The Turk, and there was a rush for him.

But the cry had gone round, and with that magic power the men of the ring seem to possess for scenting carrion on all sides could be heard the odds expanding against The Turk.

"Looks uncommon bad for the favourite," said Rolf.

"I believe that beggar was right all," said Nat.
"How those fellows do scent out a real dead 'un."

Hostilities had commenced against The Turk with real earnest, so much so that Mr. Fairfield began to suspect there was something wrong. He was a steward of the meeting, and could not bear to hear his favourite horse bandied about like this. But he never doubted the jockey. His own character was above suspicion, so he let matters alone, although he felt uneasy.

The saddling bell had rung, and Rolf and Nat were watching Testator undergo his toilet. The horse looked fit, and Hilton felt proud of his charge. A small crowd gathered round him, but the throng pushing and squeezing for a look at Lobelia was immense. The mare could not have been fitter, and Marlow and Rushton felt sure of a win.

In justice to the trainer, it must be said he had no idea Rushton had got at Stedman. Lambton was to ride Lobelia, and a real good jockey he had proved himself to be. The Turk had also a number of admirers, and the various candidates for the race, fifteen in all, were scanned by the crowd.

Hilton finished Testator's preparations, and then leaving him in charge of the lad, said, "I'll just go and fix the other up, Mr. Standish. Come and have a look at him."

"I forgot," laughed Rolf. "We've two in the race, Nat. Let's go and see The Outlaw."

Not a soul near the shed where the despised outsider stood, with Williams, the stable lad, by his side.

"Looks all right," said Hilton.

"So far as looks go no one can grumble," said Rolf, "but he's an arrant coward, I'm afraid."

Hilton made no remark, but quietly saddled the horse.

The Outlaw had grown and thickened out a good deal, and seemed full of muscle. His coat shone like satin, and he had a look about the head which would have pleased some people.

A light-weight jockey but little known named Rufus had been engaged to ride him, and he presently appeared in a bright green jacket, with yellow cap.

"Your colours, I suppose, Hilton," laughed Rolf, as he placed his hand on the lad.

"Yes, had 'em some time. Been registered for years. Not had much luck with 'em of late though," he said.

"And I don't suppose you will have to-day," said Rolf; "but you may win if you can," he said to the jockey, with a smile.

"I'll try my best, sir," said the lad. "He looks as if he could gallop."

"He can, if he likes," said Rolf, "but he's no heart."

The jockey's face fell. He would dearly have loved to win a Sydney Cup.

Rolf and Nat moved away, and Hilton said to the boy :

"Don't look glum, my lad. I've seen worse horses than The Outlaw win. You just keep well in the front rank and watch Lobelia. Keep close on her track. Never mind another d——d animal in the race. Just ride the colt as though it was a match with the mare. Keep on the outside, and don't get blocked. You'll have a faster ride than you imagine, I reckon. Mind what I've told you, and it'll be your own fault if you're not well up at the finish. Don't cut him with the whip if it's a close thing until you're nearly on the post. Then dig the spurs in and hit him hard."

Rufus brightened up considerably and said :

"I'll mind what you say, Mr. Hilton. Put me a couple of sovs on him. What's the price?"

"Any price," said Hilton. "I'll lay you fifty to nothing."

"Thank you, sir," said the lad as Hilton went away to Testator.

Roberts, a good, honest jockey, but not brilliant, had the leg-up on Testator.

Hilton gave his instructions, something similar to those he had told Rufus, namely, to watch Lobelia well ; but Roberts, being a more experienced hand, he thought it better to let him ride his own race. The betting now became very heavy. Lobelia was first favourite, and Rushton refused to hedge a copper.

As Stedman went past him on The Turk, he said :

"Don't forget ; five thousand, you know."

"All right, Mr. Rushton," was the reply, and The Turk and his jockey passed out of the gate.

"What price Testator?" said Rolf.

"Seven to one, sir," said a bookmaker.

"In hundreds," said Rolf ; and the bet was booked.

"We'd better save on Lobelia," said Nat.

"Not a copper," said Rolf. "I'll never back a mare of that brute Rushton's."

"All right," said Nat. "What do you say to a score on our other one?"

"Don't fool cash away," said Rolf, "because you've got plenty. Let's go on the stewards' stand ; the ladies are all right."

They went up and waited for the horses to go past.

Lobelia went striding along with low, sweeping motion specially noticeable, and they could not but

acknowledge, much against their wills, that the mare would be hard to beat.

"Here comes our fellow," said Rolf, as Testator went past. "Not quite such a taking stride as the mare's, but he does Hilton credit."

The Turk was cheered as he went by at a steady pace, and he looked a magnificent horse.

"They've all gone, now," said Rolf, as he turned away his head.

"What the deuce is this?" said someone in front of him, and he looked round again.

A brilliant green jacket went past like a flash.

"Gad, the brute's bolted," said Nat.

The Outlaw pulled and tugged at his little jockey but the lad sat him well and held on like grim death.

"I'd forgotten him," said Rolf. "By Jove, the lad rides well."

The Outlaw's first appearance in public seemed likely to cause a sensation. When he reached the turn he tried to bolt. He went right across towards the road, but Rufus just succeeded in pulling him off the outer rails. It was a narrow escape. Then the son of Forest King stood stock still. He looked round for a few moments as if uncertain what to do. Suddenly he caught sight of the other horses, and Rufus giving him his head he cantered slowly back. Opposite the stand the crowd cheered the plucky lad, and The Outlaw again stopped dead. He had never heard that deafening noise before, and it startled him. He snorted, and then stood on his hind legs. The lad rode him splendidly. Then he lashed out behind, and whirled round like a teetotum, trying to unseat his jockey. No use, Rufus sat like a rock.

"He's well named," said Maude to Tilly. "He's a regular outlaw."

"He might just as well be in the stable for all the chance he has of winning," said Tilly, "although I have drawn him in a sweep."

"It's dangerous to let a brute like that run," said Briscoe. "He'll be the death of somebody." By this time The Outlaw had quieted down. Rufus patted his neck and coaxed him, and gradually got him towards the starter.

"The lad deserves a bit for his pluck," said Rolf "We'll not forget him, eh, Nat?"

"No," said Smiley. "He's no fool on a horse."

"It's a deuced pity we let Hilton start him," said Rolf. "Look at the beggar now he's at the post. He's lashing out in all directions."

"Here, 50 to 1 some of these runners!" yelled a bookmaker. "Here, 50 to 1 this here Outlaw. No, sir? Well, bloo'me, I ain't laid him yet. Here, I'll lay yer 66 to 1."

Even this offer didn't tempt backers. The Outlaw was, indeed, a rank outsider.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DESPERATE RACE.

THE Outlaw's performances at the post made many an owner quake for the chances of their horses. A kick at the start often puts a horse out of the race, and the consequence is an erratic animal like The Outlaw comes in for a fair share of opprobrium.

The starter had some difficulty in getting the field together, and Rushton, as he saw Lobelia become restive, cursed his luck, and The Outlaw in particular.

"D—— it," he muttered ; " I believe they've started the brute on the off chance he'll lame my mare before the start. How that devil of a jockey keeps alongside her. What the deuce can it mean ? "

There were more anxious eyes on that green jacket than Rushton's.

Hilton, who was standing on the rise of the lawn, saw The Outlaw's performances, and smiled quietly. It would not have troubled his conscience at all had the horse kicked the mare in a dangerous part.

A false start, and the green jacket tears away to the front, until it seems as though The Outlaw had gone away again. His jockey, however, pulled him up, and once more got in line.

At last. Mr. Watson has them in line, and the flag drops. A beautiful start, and a cheer announces the fact.

" What's that leading ? " said Rolf.

" Prince Rupert. Making the running, I suppose, for Lobelia," said Nat.

Past the stand they came. Prince Rupert still held a full three lengths' lead. Then came three fairly well backed 'horses, followed by Lobelia, The Outlaw, The Turk, Testator, and Lucifer.

"By Jovè, The Outlaw gallops well," said Nat. "What a sell it would be if he got home."

"He certainly performs differently now to what he did at Yeronga. It's the colours up and the excitement but he'll fall back when they've gone a mile and a half," said Rolf.

As they swept past Oxenham's Lobelia began to race up to the leaders, and The Outlaw stuck at her girths like a leech. But Lambton was not afraid of the outsider. His great bugbear was Testator.

Stedman rode the Turk steadily. He knew what was expected of him. He had to run second to Lobelia and win a big stake for Rushton, and at the same time give Mr. Fairfield no cause to grumble, or even suspect anything. If it came to the worst he'd beat Testator at any price, even if he had to win.

A curious complication in the Sydney Cup this.

Roberts commenced to bring Testator up. He did not like the way in which The Outlaw was running. He felt it would not be a feather in his cap to let a novice like Rufus beat him.

He knew the pace was a cracker, and thought it would not last, because The Outlaw was in front. Along the back stretch they went. The horses were all remarkably well together, and at least ten of them had a chance.

The excitement on the stand was intense. It was seldom such an even race was run for the Sydney Cup.

"Dashed if I don't think the outsider will beat Testator," said Nat.

"Nonsense," said Rolf. "He'll never last at that pace, but I'm afraid Lobelia will. See now there goes Roberts at Stedman," as Testator and the Turk crept slowly up.

It was a great race. Past the sheds they went, and Prince Rupert fell back beaten.

Lambton eased Lobelia a little. He did not feel afraid of the Outlaw, and the green jacket got up level.

"By Jove! The Outlaw leads," said Rolf.

"What the devil's that?" said one excited bookie. "Crikey, it's the blesseddest outsider in the race. S'help me, he'll get home."

Hilton watched Lambton's mare, and knew what it meant. He got excited. Would Rufus keep his head or lose it. "If he hits the beggar or rides him it's all up," he muttered.

"How well The Outlaw's running," said Tilly. "Wouldn't it be fun if he won, dad?"

"We should never hear the last of it from Hilton," said Briscoe.

At that moment Lambton saw The Outlaw had plenty of foot left, and he shook the mare up again, and she soon reached his head.

"She'll win. Lobelia 'll win. I'll bet a level hundred she wins," cried Rushton.

"Done," said Rolf, and Rushton glared at him like a tiger.

Round the bend they swept, and as they entered the straight the excited multitude became almost frantic.

Up crept The Turk, with Testator on his quarters.

"The Turk wins! The Turk wins!" yelled a thousand voices. The horse was a public favourite and carried the public's money.

Level now. Lobelia has her nose in front, but only

just. Lucifer has come with a rattle second. Then The Outlaw still on the mare's girth. The Turk and Testator hard at it. A mighty struggle, and the breathless awe of the crowd denoted it.

The distance. That fatal spot where many a good 'un caves in.

"We're licked," said Rolf with a rueful smile, as he saw Roberts hard at work on Testator.

"Not yet," said Nat. "By Jove, look at The Outlaw! Rufus hasn't moved yet."

"He'll have to," said Rolf.

"Lobelia! Lobelia! Lobelia!" yell the frantic crowd.

The bookmakers look glum as the gallant mare forges ahead.

Rushton's face was a picture. His eyes blazed with triumph. He would win a great stake and pay all the beggars out. The Turk, too, "must get second—there was only The Outlaw to beat," as he saw Lucifer drop back done for.

Lambton gave a glance at Rufus, and saw the lad's face was very pale. He smiled as he thought how he could dispose of such a jockey at the finish. But The Turk must get second. He glanced round and saw Stedman creeping up. He felt the race was over.

How the crowd yelled. It was deafening.

Nearer and nearer they came, still Rufus never stirred, and The Outlaw lost a neck or more.

"If the lad would sit down and ride the beggar," said Rolf.

"He'd lose the race," chimed in Nat. "It is his only plan to keep still."

The Turk was now level with The Outlaw, with Lobelia half-a-length to the good.

"He'll never win now," thought Hilton.

At last a roar from the crowd. Those leather-lunged bookies, how they can shout. "The outsider wins." "The outsider wins," and half-a-dozen hats went up in the air in anticipation of settling day.

"Lobelia wins!" "The Turk wins!" cried the backers of the favourites.

Another second or two and it would be all over.

Rushton felt safe at heart as regards the mare, but would The Turk run second. He thought he would.

"Ride him," roared Hilton in his excitement, and as though the lad heard him he lifted the whip and at the same time drove the spurs home. He afterwards said he felt as though he had struck an electric battery. The Outlaw, contrary to his usual custom, did not flinch. His blood was up, and he felt eager for the fray. He responded to the call with a will, and before Lambton or Stedman knew where they were the green jacket was level with the rider of Lobelia. Neck and neck; no mistake about it, and only a few strides more.

Again the cry, "The outsider wins!" echoed all over the course.

How the blood coursed through Rufus' body. The lad grew frantic, but he restrained himself wonderfully. He was riding like a demon against two crack jockeys, and he knew it.

Whips were out and spurs were at work. It was, indeed, a desperate race. Lobelia strained every nerve, but she could not shake The Outlaw off. Lambton ground his teeth with rage, and rode for his life.

Never on Randwick course had there been such a race. Rolf could not speak, and Nat cheered lustily. That green jacket would not be done with.

Past the box the pair flashed, amid the maddest excitement.

"The outsider wins!" yell the books. "Lobelia wins!" yell the backers.

"Think the mare just got home," said Rolf.

"No, the green jacket won," said another. "I don't know the horse."

"Lobelia won by a clear half length," said Rushton.

"Nonsense, man. A nose, at the most, if at all," said some one.

Would the numbers never go up.

Ah! there they are.

No. 5, Lobelia.

"Hurrah," yelled Rushton, as he shook his fist at the bookmakers down below. "I've ruined a lot of you."

The words died on his lips as Fleming, the well-known leviathan, pointed to the box and said,

"Not yet, my boy. Look there."

What's that. Could he believe his eyes. Could it be true. He could have howled with rage.

No. 15 had been placed alongside No. 5, and the judge had declared,

"Lobelia and The Outlaw dead heat, The Turk third half a length away."

"What a race." "Never saw such a finish before." "That lad rode splendidly." "Will they run off?" "I'll bet Rushton does; he must beat the young 'un," and such like expressions were heard on all sides.

"Here's a go," said Rolf. "Who'd have thought it. Won't Hilton crow."

But Hilton did not crow. He felt sure Rushton would run off, and it looked 10 to 1 on the mare.

Rolf and Nat hurried to the weighing room, where they found Rushton fuming and in a great passion.

"It's a put up job. The mare won," he said.

"If you're not quiet I'll have you put out," said Mr. Fairfield. "It was a dead heat."

"All right," was signalled.

Now came the question would they divide.

"What do you intend doing," said Rolf. "Divide or run off?"

"Divide," said Rushton. "Not me. Don't suppose I'm such a mug. Your horse is dead beat."

"All right, please yourself," said Rolf, and it was decided to run off after the last race.

A consultation was held, in which all the party joined. Tilly said the drawer of Lobelia in the sweep had offered to divide, and Hilton said, "Do so by all means, Miss. We'll try our best, but it ain't likely the young 'un will stand another race."

"We must try him," said Rolf. "That lad rode well. Where is he?"

"Here, sir," said Rufus, touching his cap.

"You've made your name, my boy," said Rolf. "Recollect you've got £50 now for your pluck, and if you beat Lobelia in the run-off I'll make it £500."

"I'll do my best, sir. I haven't ridden many such horses as The Outlaw. I wish I had the chance."

"You like him, then," said Rolf.

"He's a clinker. He's not done, Mr. Standish, and I think I'll win."

"Bravo!" said Maude. "Win, and I'll give you a handsome present."

"So will I," said Nat. "I'll double Rolf's 'monkey'."

Rufus was overwhelmed. He looked hard at Tilly. She looked "awfully pretty," so he thought.

"Well," said Tilly, "what is it?"

Rufus actually blushed as he stammered: "I was

just thinking what a beauty you were, Miss," he said, respectfully, and in such a solemn manner they all burst out laughing.

Now Rufus was not half a bad lad, and he was not over sixteen. He looked younger, in fact had quite a childish face.

"I know what would please you, Rufus," said Nat with a wink at Rolf.

"What?" said the jockey.

"A present from Miss Briscoe."

"So it would just," was the reply.

"I've nothing to give him," said Tilly, with a pout, "I'm too poor."

"Let me shake hands with you if I win. That's all I want," said Rufus.

"I'll hug you, boy, if you win," said the impulsive Tilly.

Rufus looked staggered. She evidently took him for a mere lad. At last he said,

"It's a bargain, Miss. Don't forget it," and he looked so pleased they all laughed.

"Tilly, I'm jealous," said Rolf.

She gave a merry laugh. "What, of a boy like that," she said, as Rufus walked away.

"He'll claim that promise if he wins, I'll bet," said Nat.

"Then he shall have it," said Tilly, with a merry laugh.

"I think you're pretty safe," said Rolf.

The time soon passed away. It was strange to see the crowd remain after the last race. Very few left the course. They were all too anxious to see the dead-heaters run their great race again. It certainly looked odds on the mare with such a jockey as Lambton in the saddle against a youth like Rufus.

Both horses had been well looked after during the interval.

Hilton had given The Outlaw a dose of whiskey, and it seemed to have put extra courage in him. "Dutch courage" Nat called it.

The young 'un looked very fresh considering the great race he had recently run. The crowd gathered round him were not quite so sanguine about Lobelia after all.

"Take six to one!" "Take six to one!" cried the bookmakers, and Lobelia was a hot favourite.

"Here, young 'un, I'll lay you a hundred to nix if you get home," said Fleming. "I'd like to see Rushton done for more reasons than one."

"So would I," said Nat; "but don't stuff the lad too full of cash or he may lose his head."

Lobelia lashed out as she was being saddled. She seemed hearty and well.

"I'll win easily, Mr. Rushton," said Lambton. "It was fiddling about for The Turk to run second lost the race."

"Curse The Turk," said Rushton. "But the mare must win this time. No mistake, mind."

"Don't let The Outlaw get too far away," said Marlow.

"The young 'un's better than I thought he is and Rufus is no fool."

"Rufus be d——d," said Lambton. "D'yer suppose a kid like that can beat me in a match."

"Don't be too sure," said Marlow. "Mind what I say. Don't let the light-weight make too much play."

"Bother," was all Lambton said.

"Make the most of your weight," said Hilton to Rufus. "You've got a nation fast 'un under you. Cut out the mile like blazes. If you're three or four lengths in front,

then keep going. Ride the beggar right out, and you may win. It's our only chance to make the weight tell on the mare."

The bell rang. The two cracks went out at the gate, and the crowd cheered lustily as they went slowly down to the post.

"Here, I'll take four to one! I'll take four to one!" was the last shout Rushton heard as he went up the stand steps.

The odds were lessening. It sounded bad. He had a terrible presentiment that the green jacket would be the means of his downfall.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE RUN-OFF.

THERE was almost as much excitement over the run-off between Lobelia and The Outlaw as there had been over the Cup itself. There had never been a dead heat for the race before, and two two-mile races in one afternoon was a great strain on the horses.

Old sportsmen recalled the time when two-mile heats were run over Homebush and Parramatta course, and spoke of the days of Jorrocks, Sportsman, Cossack, Sir Hercules, and sundry equine celebrities of bygone times.

"Looks like old days," they said, and chuckled over the coming match.

No mistake this time. The devil had all been taken out of the son of Forest King.

The flag fell at the first attempt, and off dashed The Outlaw to the front, making the pace a cracker. Lambton shook up Lobelia and went steadily in pursuit. Both were heartily cheered as they passed the stand.

The Outlaw had a four lengths' lead, and Rolf said to Nat :

"I wish that was the finish, old boy."

"So do I," said Nat. "I'm afraid the young 'un will never last out that pace."

Along the back stretch there was no perceptible difference, and Lobelia did not seem to gain an inch.

Rushton became anxious. The defeat of the mare meant absolute ruin, unless—and a thought flashed across his mind—"Maude Standish." There was a gleam of hope there.

But he never thought the mare could lose. She must beat a beggarly outsider like The Outlaw. Why the brute hadn't even a pedigree.

The brute without the pedigree was running well, however, and as they passed the sheds the light-green jacket was still in front.

Tilly and Maude were very excited, and even Briscoe forgot all his troubles and stared at the gay colours as though his life depended upon it.

"Be gad, we'll win," he said.

"Oh, I hope so, dad."

"You'll have to hug Rufus if we do," said Maude mockingly.

"I'll kiss the little fellow," said Tilly, "and give him the hug in."

"I'll tell him," said Maude.

"It's a wager," said Tilly.

On came the pair. All eyes were centred upon them. Round the bend came The Outlaw, Rufus as still as a mouse. But Lobelia had gained a length, and her giant stride began to tell.

"He'll never get home," said Rolf, as he lowered his glass, "the mare's catching him fast. It's too much to expect of the colt."

"It's not over yet," said Nat. "Recollect how well he finished last time."

The distance was reached, and the mare was but two lengths off, and Lambton sitting still.

"She'll win," shouted Rushton, mad with excitement, and as he waved his arms frantically the butt of a small pistol could be seen protruding out of his waistcoat pocket.

What did he mean to do with that? Small weapons can work a good deal of harm.

The half distance and now the mare's nose is level with The Outlaw's hind quarters. Rufus raises the whip. The same tactics he adopted before. Would they answer? Thud! The crack could be heard amid the breathless silence. The Outlaw swerved and the mare drew up to his shoulder.

Rufus felt all was lost. With one great effort he drove the spurs home, and his whip flashed in the air like lightning. No mistake the lad could ride. What were his thoughts at that moment?

The Outlaw came again. Sheer gameness did it. Neck and neck. Nose and nose. First the horse, then the mare. It was merely a question of which would get the last stride in.

Strong men trembled with excitement. The book-makers shouted themselves hoarse. Rolf lost all control and waved his hat like a madman. Nat roared out,

"green wins." Hilton shouted, "We'll win! We'll win!" Roars from the crowd. The last stride. The judge's box. A flash in the fast waning sunlight, and the gaudy green jacket gets up in the last stride.

No mistake about it this time. It was a near go, but "The Outlaw has won on the post by a head." So said the judge as he put No. 15 up.

The scene that followed beggars description. The bookmakers howled for joy. They had, metaphorically speaking, "skinned the lamb" twice over.

The public forgave the defeat of the favourite in their excitement over a good race.

"What's up?" and a rush is made for the rails.

"Hold up, lad. Another minute will do it," said Jimmy Ashworth, encouragingly, as he rode in his well-known scarlet jacket on his old grey alongside the winner.

"Keep up, boy. You've made your name. You rode the best race I've seen for many a year," said Ashworth, in kindly tones.

Rufus was almost in a dead faint, but the encouraging words revived him.

"By Heavens, he'll fall off," said Nat, as he rushed towards the horse.

"Come back," said Rolf. "If you touch him it's all up. Rushton will take advantage of every point."

Hilton seized the Outlaw's head, and the noble animal stood with nostrils extended almost gasping for breath. His sides heaved like a pair of bellows. He was dead beat, and no wonder.

Rufus got out of the saddle somehow and unbuckled it. How he did it he never exactly knew. He walked with a vacant air into the weighing room. The scale went down.

"All right."

Up went the red flag, and again the crowd cheered.

Rufus sank to the ground, and Nat caught hold of him tenderly.

As he raised him the jockey said, faintly :

"It was a fearful hard fight, sir, but the hug did it."

"The what?" said Nat.

"The hug," said the lad, and he fainted right away.

It suddenly struck Nat that Rufus alluded to Tilly's promise, and he had to laugh out.

"What's the matter, now," said Rolf. "Surely this is no time for laughing. The lad's half dead."

"I can't help it," said Nat. "What do you think he said?"

"Blessed if I know," said Rolf.

"It was a fearful hard fight, but the hug did it," laughed Nat, still holding the lad on his arm.

"The what did it?" said Rolf.

"Exactly what I asked him," said Nat, more amused than ever. "The hug did it, don't you see?"

Rolf did see, and he, too, had to smile.

"Then we have to thank Tilly for this win," said Rolf. "Well, she'll keep her promise, and the lad deserves it."

By this time Rufus had come round. He looked pale as a ghost, but could walk with assistance. They led him gently out, and met Tilly, Maude, and Mr. Briscoe.

Without a moment's hesitation, Tilly went right up to the lad and hugged the tiny figure with its bright green jacket in her arms.

How the crowd cheered the beautiful girl.

"That's it, miss. If there were more like her the lads would ride straighter," said one rough fellow.

"The hug did it, miss," said Rufus. "I'd never have

got home but for the thoughts of that. God bless you, Miss ; I'll never forget it." And he never did.

What about Rushton ? He went down the stand steps a beaten man. But he had some courage. He was not done. He'd beat 'em yet. Strange to say Maude never saw him as he passed by.

As Rolf and Nat walked towards The Outlaw's quarters, they saw Rushton go rapidly across to Lobelia.

"He's up to no good, I'll follow him," said Nat, and he ran off, with Rolf close at his heels.

"Stand back," said Rushton to the crowd. Nat was close on his heels.

"Now then, you brute," he said to the beautiful mare that had fought so well for him ; "you shan't cause me any more trouble," and in his mad rage he drew out his pocket pistol and levelled it at her head, the wistful eyes looking in his demon darkened face. No pity there. A crack, and the mare started violently. Too late. Nat Smiley had hit his arm up just in time, and the bullet sped harmlessly away.

Rushton turned round with a great oath, and saw his deadly enemy facing him.

Thus they met, the seducer and the betrayed husband.

"You grovelling wretch," said Nat. "Would you shoot that mare ? She's worth a hundred such men as you."

"So she is !" cheered the crowd, and their angry demeanour boded ill for Rushton.

"It's no business of yours," he hissed. "I can do what I like with her. She's mine," and he raised his pistol again.

Nat snatched it out of his hand, and said, "Drop that

game. I'll keep this for you. I may want it some day," he added, significantly.

Rushton's face blanched. Could Nat know all. Impossible. The thought, however, quieted him down.

"Listen to me, Rushton," said Rolf. "I hear you've been hard hit. I'll give you a monkey, and let off my bets, for the mare."

"Your bets," said Rushton in surprise.

"Yes. Don't you recollect you gave me *The Outlaw* in?"

Rushton did recollect, and he scowled. Trapped again, he thought.

"It's a bargain," he said. "Take the brute."

Lobelia had indeed changed hands for the better, and again the crowd cheered.

So it happened that the two gallant steeds that had raced so well were stable mates for the future, and no man felt prouder than Hilton, as he saw *The Outlaw* and Lobelia, accompanied by Testator, safely home to their quarters.

The Outlaw had borne out Hilton's good opinion of him, and the farmer trainer felt justly proud. Hilton said he had backed "our horse" when the money had been given him in Tattersall's, but by our horse he had meant *The Outlaw*, and he had a good win accordingly.

What about Blossom Squirm? He had lost heavily on the mare, and was consequently in a bad humour. He, however, consoled himself with the thought he had to meet Nat Smiley, and speculated how much he could draw on the "lucky digger" for the information he had to impart.

"Arter all I reckon I'll not make such a bad deal," said Blossom, reflectively. "What's the use o' growling

over spilt rum. It's Rushton's money I had. Cuss him, I might have knowed he'd never have th' luck to win. I'll be even with him. He'll have to bleed again. If he's got nothing left, he'll darned soon have to find it, or s'help me I'll bring Mrs. Smiley to life again," and Blossom chuckled at the thought of resurrecting Mrs. Smiley.

At Her Majesty's that night Maude Bradley met with a great reception, and some enthusiast yelled out when the barbarian chief appeared to claim the Queen of Love, "that's The Outlaw," and the roar of applause that followed this sally was deafening. Maude could not forbear smiling. Showers of bouquets greeted her. It was a night of triumph for her. And as Nat Smiley looked at her in all her beauty he could not help saying with a sigh, "It was the hug did it."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT BLOSSOM TOLD NAT.

NAT SMILEY wondered what Blossom could possibly have to tell him. The few hints dropped on the race-course had, however, raised his curiosity, and when Blossom's information as to the Cup came so correct, he felt more than ever that the man knew something of his past career.

Punctually to time he appeared at the Metropolitan, and there, sure enough, was Blossom, looking respect-

able, so far as appearances went. He touched his hat to Smiley, and said :

"You see, I was waiting for you, sir. I knew you'd come, and I don't think you'll regret it."

"I hope not," said Nat. "Is it something very terrible you have to impart?"

"It is not a pleasant tale," said Blossom, "but I expect it's not the only one in that line by a good many. People bringing misfortunes on themselves must take the consequences."

"Quite right," said Nat, "but let us go inside, I dare say you would not object to a glass of something."

"No," said Blossom, with a grin. "I don't let much pass me in that line."

"I thought not," replied Nat. "I wish to have some conversation with this man," he said to the landlord, and they were shown into a private room.

"Now, Mr. Squirm," said Nat, "we are alone, and I should like to hear what you have got to tell me."

"You don't like Richard Rushton," commenced Blossom.

"No," said Nat, decidedly, and his face became gloomy. "I have good cause to hate him."

"That's right," said Blossom. "You'd not be above taking a little neat revenge out of him, I suppose."

"If it's fair and above board I should not," said Nat, "but I can't do underhand work even with such a man as Rushton."

"This ain't underhand work, Mr. Smiley," said Blossom. "I can give you some information about him that you can use as you think proper, but——," and he hesitated.

"But what?" said Nat.

"Well, you see it's this way. I'm a poor man,

Mr. Smiley, and you're rich. A few pounds would not hurt you, and you'd not miss it."

"I see," said Nat, with a smile. "Cash down or credit? Come, I'll not see you a loser, whatever your information may be."

"I'll trust you. I've heard it said Nat Smiley's word's as good as his bond."

"Thank you," replied Nat. "Proceed."

"You had a wife, I believe, Mr. Smiley," began Blossom.

"I had," replied Nat, with a sigh.

"Richard Rushton took her away from you," said Blossom.

"The villain did, curse him for it," said Nat. "But poor creature, she's dead and gone, and, no doubt, suffered bitterly."

"She did," said Blossom.

"How do you know?" said Nat, in surprise.

"Because she was under my roof for months. Because that brute, Rushton, bullied her, and insulted her, whenever he came near the place," said Blossom.

"He shall pay for it," said Nat, between his teeth.

"You've made one mistake, though," said Blossom.

"What's that?" asked Nat.

"Your wife's not dead," said Blossom, slowly eyeing his man closely all the time to see how he'd take it.

Nat Smiley sprang from his chair, and came close to Blossom.

"It's a lie," he said. "She is dead."

"No, she's not," said Blossom. "Steady master, you needn't call me hard names."

This intelligence seemed to overwhelm Nat. He did not speak for several minutes.

"Where is she?" he said at last.

"At my house, where she has been for months," said Blossom. "Poor creature, she has suffered. I'm not a soft-hearted man, but the troubles she has gone through are simply awful."

"Tell me all about her," said Nat.

"Well you see," said Blossom, "Rushton soon got tired of her, I expect. He ill-used her as much as he dared. Then he began to leave her short of money. The poor creature took to drink to drown her cares."

Nat moaned.

"Then the other week he came and there was a scene," and Blossom related to Nat the occurrences with which the reader is acquainted, and how he had given Rushton to understand she was dead.

Nat listened attentively to the sad story. What he felt Blossom could not know, but his face was drawn and pained.

"You did well, Squirm," he said presently. "I am glad you deceived Rushton. It will be another instrument of vengeance in my hands. Poor lass! poor lass! I've forgiven her long ago. She was tempted by that snake. I was not rich then, and he dazzled her with his fine promises. I loved her once. That time is past. I have cast her out of my heart, and she can never be replaced there. Squirm, you have indeed given me startling information. You shall be well paid," said Nat, as he put his hand in his breast coat pocket and pulled out a roll of notes, which he handed to Blossom.

"Keep what you want," he said, "and be kind to her. I will pay you well to look after her. Give me the address."

Blossom did as he was requested, and Nat put it down in his pocket-book.

"That will do," he said. "Good night. I will let you know when I want you again."

"Thank you, sir," said Blossom. "Must I tell her I've seen you?"

"By no means," said Nat. "Never mention my name until I tell you to do so."

"I'm mum," said Blossom, and as he went away he thought what a lively time of it Richard Rushton would have when Nat felt inclined to let him feel the weight of his vengeance.

Nat Smiley pondered deeply over what Blossom had told him. It was a surprise to him to learn his wife was still alive, for he had been told on the best authority she was dead. Was he pleased she lived? He could hardly analyse his feelings in this respect. He would never face the public disgrace of the divorce court, and yet to be tied for the remainder of his life to a woman he did not love, and who had forsaken him, would be hard. Then another sweet face rose before him, and he saw a brilliant woman behind the footlights with her gorgeous costume, her bewitching eyes, her voluptuous form, and her wealth of flowing hair. A woman who had the world at her feet—when the world condescended to go to the theatre. He could not help contrasting the two. A few hours before he had thought himself a free man, and now that illusion was rudely dispelled. Perhaps Blossom had lied, and he had parted with his money for a mere plausible tale. Blossom was not a man to stick at such trifles as concocting a story for the sake of gain. An idea suddenly flashed across his mind. He would go and see for himself if she really lived. It could be done without her knowledge if he managed it properly.

Nat had sat long after Blossom went, in deep thought, and it was now late. He fancied it probable Blossom

would go straight home with the money and remain there for the night. He looked at his watch. Just after eleven.

He hailed a hansom, and drove to the top of the street, the name of which Blossom had given him.

Here he got out and dismissed the cabman.

As he took his fare the man said :

"That's not a very nice quarter you're going into. I'd advise you to be careful, sir. There are some 'nation bad characters down there."

"Thanks," said Nat. "I'll keep a sharp look out, I've got a protector with me, and I've been used to roughing it."

"All right, sir. Wish you luck. Good night," and he drove away.

Nat walked slowly down the dimly lighted street until he came to the house he was in search of. He tapped lightly at the door. No one answered. The place was in darkness. He tapped again. This time a dim light appeared and a voice from inside said :

"Who the devil's here at this time of night rousing respectable folks up. Be off, yer drunken sweep, or I'll stouch yer."

"Hush," said Nat. "I'm Nat Smiley, Blossom. I want to see you."

Blossom recognised the voice, and gently unfastened the door.

"Beg pardon, sir. Never expected you at this time of night. Come to see the missis?"

"Where is she? Awake at this hour?" said Nat.

"Hush!" said Blossom; "she's in that room. She might recognise your voice."

A slight sound as of a bed creaking came from the

room, and Blossom pushed Nat towards the stairs, whispering :

"Get down there. Quick. I think she's stirring."

Nat hurried down into the kitchen, where Mrs. Squirm lay fast asleep on a couch.

Blossom looked into the room with the light.

He started back. There was Nat Smiley's wife sitting upright in bed, with her eyes dilated, and ears strained to catch every sound.

"What was that, Blossom?" she said. "Who's was that voice? Tell me, quick, quick."

"There was no one there but me," said Blossom. "I was just fastening up for the night."

"I've had an awful dream," she said. "I dreamt my own dear husband had come to see me, and that he cursed me as I lay here. Oh! it was horrible. And then I awoke with a start, and fancied I heard his voice."

"Nonsense," said Blossom. "Here, take one of your sleeping draughts. You want it to-night or you'll never go off again."

"Yes, I'd better have one, Blossom," she said.

The rough fellow poured out the medicine as gently as he could, and gave it her. She took it, and with a sigh of satisfaction fell back on her pillow and dozed off to sleep.

Blossom watched her for some time, until her heavy breathing denoted she was sound asleep, and then went downstairs.

"I want to see her, but don't want her to see me," said Nat.

"She's sound asleep now," said Blossom. "I gave her a good dose, and she'll not wake afore morning. It never fails to give her rest. She had been dreaming

and fancied you had come to curse her. She must have heard you speak in the passage, but I told her it was all in her dream. Come upstairs now and have a look at her."

A snore from Mrs. Squirm on the couch made Nat start.

"Drat that old woman," said Blossom ; " but she do snore uncommon hard. It's not pleasant, is it ? "

Nat could not forbear a smile, despite his depressed feelings.

He followed Blossom upstairs, and when he reached the door he said, " Give me the light, and stop outside."

He entered the room softly. How his heart beat. He was to see the woman he had thought dead, the wife of happier days, who had deserted him, ruined his home, and lost her honour. He dared not look at the bed. He heard the heavy breathing, and felt there was no fear of detection. And yet he did not look. What would she be like ? Would she be much changed ? He thought of how she looked when he first met her. It must be done. Perhaps Blossom had deceived him, or had been deceived himself, and it might not be his wife after all.

He held the candle up and approached the bed. There she lay, her wan white face upturned, and a delicate thin arm and hand over the coverlet.

Nat gazed at her earnestly, and the tears started to his eyes.

How changed. All that bright happy beauty gone, and in its place a poor faded face with deep lines of suffering implanted thereon. What thoughts flashed through his mind as he looked at her. What a wreck she was. Death must come to her soon, he felt. The grim dark

hand of the slayer of all mankind was upon her. He had sealed her for his own. Still and motionless she lay. The potion had done its work. Forgive her. Aye, poor fallen woman, he forgave her a thousand times. As he looked at her face he traced the lines of beauty which once existed there. His manly heart put back the pangs it suffered, and he realised that he stood before the woman he had sworn to cherish. He had kept his vow, she had broken hers, but no matter, he would think of her as she was, not as she is. He felt a great lump in his throat. His whole nature was softened. She slept, and knew not he was by her side. He had come not to curse, but to forgive. He took the poor little hand in his own, and pressed it, and then tenderly laid it on the coverlet. Hot tears coursed down his honest face. He could not restrain them. He would not have done so for worlds. They relieved his pent up feelings. He knelt down by that poor erring woman's bedside, and murmured,

"God forgive her as freely as I do, and guard her from all harm."

He meant it too. He was not a religious man, but he had the reverence for a Supreme Being which many men who never enter a church possess. She sighed deeply in her sleep. She muttered. He bent down to catch her words.

"My poor Nat, forgive," he heard.

She is dreaming. Dream on, for he is near. Gently he kissed her brow, and a smile passed over her face. She would be better for the kiss, although she might not know he had given it her. At last he left her with a parting blessing.

Blossom had spoken the truth. It was, indeed, his wife, but how changed.

He bade him good night, and walked home in deep thought.

That still, quiet face haunted him. Then another image rose before him, and he strove hard to banish it. Come what would, he at least would remain faithful to the woman who had deserted him.

But he had a heavy account to settle with Rushton, and the face he had just seen goaded him on to take his revenge.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TILLY MISSING.

NAT SMILEY kept his own counsel, and did not even tell Rolf what he had seen and heard at Blossom's house. He thought it was now time to commence hunting Rushton down, and yet he had no legal hold over the man, and it was a difficult matter to know how to get at him.

Rushton was a cunning scoundrel, and always managed to steer clear of the law. Nat had no desire to drag his troubles into the light of a court. What he wished was to make Rushton suffer, and ruin him socially for ever. Fate played into Nat's hands, as the sequel will show.

Maude's engagement at Her Majesty's having terminated, at Rolf's request she declined to accept other engagements, much to the disappointment of the people in the adjoining colonies. She was, however, firm in her

determination once it was taken, and resolutely declined all the tempting offers made her.

It was decided to go to Yeronga, and accordingly all the party went there for a few months. Maude was delighted with the place, and it certainly looked beautiful. She had never been on a large station, and it was a novel and pleasant experience for her.

It chanced that Rushton with a couple of confederates had been over to Melrose Creek to see what they could pick up in the mining line. The country between the Creek and Yeronga was well known to them, and one of the men had far better knowledge of it than any other person who had ever resided in the district. Numerous caves abounded, and, as Rushton remarked, they would make a nice hiding place in case of necessity. "Not much fear of a fellow's creditors finding him in one of these places," he said.

Life at Yeronga Station went on pretty much the same way as at other country places. Riding, shooting, and occasional races filled up the spare time.

One morning Maude had a headache and was compelled to remain in her room.

Rolf and Nat were going into Bathurst on business, and Mr. Briscoe remained at home. Tilly felt the time hanging heavily on her hands, and had Coal Queen saddled up for an afternoon ride.

She was accustomed to scouring about the country alone, and never felt the slightest fear of being molested. Happier times had come again. Rolf had ridden with Tilly and shown her the very spot where Testator left him, and where he got lost in the bush on his way to Melrose Creek.

On this particular afternoon Tilly thought she would ride out and see if she could discover the place for

herself. She knew the track well, and felt there would be no difficulty in finding it.

Coal Queen galloped merrily over the ground with her fair burden, and Tilly felt quite exhilarated with the motion. How she did love a ride on a good horse. She thought of the time, not far distant, when she would become Rolf's wife, and conjured up pleasant memories for the days to come. The time passed quickly away. Coal Queen still kept striding along, halting occasionally to pick her way. Tilly began to realise that the journey she had undertaken was too far. She pulled Coal Queen up, and contemplated the beautiful scene before her. A magnificent panorama it was, and she loved it with all the ardour of which her pure, country nature was capable. How lovely she looked, and what a perfect figure. She little dreamt of danger lurking near. Concealed in the bushes, however, were Rushton and his mates. They had ridden from the Creek, and were making for the Bathurst road when they heard the sound of her horse's hoofs, as they were resting on the grass. Rushton started to his feet. It was not often travellers were met with in that lonely place. He looked cautiously in the direction of the sound, and when he recognised Tilly alone on horseback a feeling of exultation passed through his black heart.

Here was a chance for revenge. Tilly alone and in his power. What humiliations he could subject her to and how he could revenge himself upon Rolf. Would the men with him assist him? There was no time to lose, he must try. He hurried back to them, and explained as quickly as he possibly could what he required from them.

They were to capture Tilly and Coal Queen and take them to one of the caves, where it would be difficult for

them to be traced for at least a couple of days. "By that time," said Rushton, with a fiendish grin, "I shall be done with her; and she can go home."

"No violence, mister," said one of the men.

"What are we to get for it?" said the other.

"I'll give you fifty pounds apiece if it comes off all right," said Rushton, and to this his companions agreed.

They approached with great caution the place where Tilly sat on Coal Queen.

The spot was favourable to their base designs. Dense bush surrounded it on three sides.

Tilly, unaware of the danger at hand, looked at the beautiful valley before her, and became lost in dreamy contemplation.

Suddenly Rushton shot out and caught Coal Queen by the bridle, and at the same instant a strong arm was placed round her waist, and she was dragged from the saddle.

After a sharp scream of surprise Tilly found herself in the power of the man she loathed.

A powerful fellow still held her in his grasp, and Rushton handing Coal Queen to the other man glanced at her with a smile.

"What's the meaning of this outrage?" said Tilly. "Let me go this instant or it will be the worse for you," and she struggled to get free from her captors.

"Not yet, my dear Miss Briscoe," said Rushton. "It is late in the afternoon for a young lady to be abroad alone, and you must accept our hospitality for the night. Poor as it is for a lady like you, I have no doubt we can make you comfortable."

"Let me go this instant," said Tilly. "Surely this is a joke, Richard Rushton, you would never detain me here."

"You must come with us, Miss Briscoe, I have something important to say to you," replied Rushton.

Despite Tilly's entreaties, she was placed on one of the horses, and a man rode on either side of her, while Rushton bestrode Coal Queen.

She saw escape for the present was hopeless, but instead of struggling and wasting her strength, she determined to wait until a favourable opportunity offered to get away. One of the men she fancied looked ashamed of the work he was engaged in, and this gave her hope.

Several miles of country were travelled, and she took notice of the various landmarks. The scenery was new to her, and she felt her captors were taking her to some inaccessible place.

The sun went down, and a halt was made until the moon rose, when the march proceeded. At last they entered a deep ravine, and the horses were walked along the bed of a small stream in which water was still running. They halted opposite a dull, dark looking rock, and Tilly was told to dismount. She was then led up a narrow gully, and in a few moments the party stood inside a spacious cave. It had evidently been used as a hiding-place in early days, for rude forms had been made and various rusty articles for cooking purposes were lying about.

"Welcome to our forest home, Miss Briscoe," said Rushton. "I trust you will have a pleasant night here."

Tilly kept up bravely, but she felt terribly frightened at being in Rushton's power. She merely said :

"When is this farce going to end. I shall expect you to put me on the right track for home at once. If you do not, I shall be missed, and a search party will not be long in finding me here," said Tilly.

"It'll be a clever party finds this cave," said one of the men. "Mr. Rushton likes a pretty girl, and faith he's got one this time."

"Leave us," said Rushton, and the two men went outside.

"I don't like this job," said one of them.

"It's all right. She's an old sweetheart. He only means to scare her a bit," said the other.

"Tilly," said Rushton, "you know how I love you. Pardon this rude way of capturing you, but I cannot live without you."

"How dare you speak to me," said Tilly. "You are a cowardly brute, and I hate and despise you. You will pay dearly for this outrage."

"You are in my power, Tilly. Those two men are in my pay, and will do what I please. Give me some hope. Promise me you will not marry Rolf Standish."

"He is worth a hundred such men as you, Richard Rushton," said Tilly. "Let me pass," and she attempted to get to the entrance to the cave.

He caught her in his arms, and held her fast.

Tilly struggled with all her might, but Rushton held her firm.

His blood was on fire, and he felt desperate. "Tilly," he whispered hoarsely, "I love you. I love you."

He bent down, and despite her cries and struggles, kissed her cheek.

She scratched his face, but he cared not. He was more like a beast than a man. All the vile passions in him seemed to have been let loose at once. He dragged her towards the far end of the cave. He never spoke, but she could see in his face that he meant to commit some dreadful deed. "Would he murder her? He might, to revenge himself upon Rolf. Would he?"—

and a thought crossed her mind, so horrible, that she fought like a tiger to defend her honour. Who would have thought she had so much strength? But at last she became exhausted, and it seemed as though Rushton would accomplish his evil purpose. He pressed her down to the ground, and as she fell on her knees her hand touched something. It was an old sharp bush-knife. In an instant she clutched it, and with a great effort raised herself up. Then she struck at him, and the blade cut his wrist. With a groan of pain, and a muttered curse, Rushton let go his hold.

In a second Tilly had bounded to her feet and rushed to the mouth of the cave. It was still moonlight, and she could see Coal Queen close at hand. If she could only reach the mare in time. Rushton saw her go, but thought there was little fear of her escaping, as the men were outside. Luckily for Tilly, however, they had strolled some distance away. Coal Queen had not been unsaddled, and had been tied up by the bridle. With the knife she still had in her hand Tilly cut one rein and then sprang into the saddle, and caught up the cut bridle. Coal Queen knew her mistress, and at once started off at a word.

Rushton came out of the cave, and as he saw what had happened gave a yell of baffled rage. The men came running down, but by this time Tilly had got a good start.

Coal Queen dashed along the bed of the stream, and as she reached an open space Tilly urged her to her utmost speed. The noble animal flew over the ground, and was almost out of sight before her pursuers had emerged from the gorge. The men seeing her so far ahead gave up the chase and returned to Rushton.

He was almost mad with rage, and swore lustily at

his companions, but they took very little notice of his outbursts.

"We could never have caught that mare," said one of the men; "and, what's more, I was sick of the job."

So was I," said the other man.

"Curse you both," said Rushton, as he walked out of the cave; "I hope she'll get bushed. If you wont go, I'll have a look for her myself, and by —— I'll make her suffer for this."

Rushton got one of the horses, and rode away alone, his companions congratulating themselves they had seen the last of him. They had no desire to get into trouble on his account, and began to think there was more in Rushton's mind than they had anticipated.

"We're well out of a bad job," said one, and his mate agreed with him.

Meanwhile Tilly rode on, heedless where she went so long as she got out of Rushton's clutches. She knew when she did not return to Yeronga that search would at once be made for her. All night long she rode Coal Queen, and she let the mare have her own way and go where she liked. When morning broke she saw with a thankful heart she had not strayed far out of the ordinary bush tracks. Coal Queen, with that unerring instinct often found in horses, had kept well on the beaten paths. Still she was many miles from home, and Rushton might overtake her. So she hurried on as fast as the state of the country would permit.

Rushton had not fared so well, and Providence favoured Tilly's escape. He cursed his luck, and seeing the chase hopeless, gave it up, and turned back towards the Creek. He knew when Tilly reached Yeronga her story would soon be told, and this time he felt he had gone too far, and the police would be quickly on his

track. He need expect no mercy from Rolf Standish. His only chance was to get out of the country. He repented now it was too late—not the foul deed he had attempted, but that he had jeopardised his safety in a moment of passion. His coward heart told him he would be hunted down, and that there was hardly a loophole of escape.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LAST OF RUSHTON.

TILLY'S disappearance caused considerable consternation at Yeronga. Rolf and Nat headed a search party, and all night long "cooe'd" through the vast forest land lying between the Station and Melrose Creek, for they surmised it was in this direction she had been lost. They fancied she must have been bushed, and that some accident had befallen her, and Rolf was terribly anxious. They never once guessed the real truth, or their rage would probably have led them astray.

Fortune favoured them, and before many hours had passed Tilly was found. The girl was much exhausted, and hysterically excited, owing to the terrible scene she had passed through. But she bore up bravely, and when Yeronga was reached, and she had somewhat recovered her usual demeanour, she related the story of Rushton's treachery and base attempt at revenge.

The indignation of Rolf, when he heard this painful story, can be well imagined. Nat Smiley was enraged, and vowed he would hunt Rushton down.

"I have a heavy account to settle with him, Rolf," he said. "Leave him to me. Tilly has escaped, but my poor lass did not. I'll have him before the week's out, dead or alive."

Rolf begged hard to accompany Nat, but the latter was firm in his resolve to go alone, and at last Rolf consented.

Nat set out from Yeronga with a light heart, for he felt he was about to meet the traitor face to face, and this time he would show him no mercy. But where to go, that was the point. In which direction had Rushton gone? Was he in hiding, or had he made for Sydney?

Nat knew a haunt of Rushton's, not far from Lithgow, and he thought he would make for that place. He rode into Bathurst, and caught the night mail.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and as the train travelled through the vast plain, wending its way slowly towards the mountains, Nat was enchanted with the scene. How quiet and peaceful all looked. The wickedness of the earth seemed banished from the place as it lay bathed in the silvery light of the moon. Curious shadows were cast by the giant trees, and the white smoke from the engine curled away in a thousand fantastic shapes, until it dropped gently down and disappeared.

Nat gazed at this fair picture, and it soothed him. It was rather chilly, and he drew up the collar of his coat, and let down the flaps of his cap, almost hiding his face. Then the warmth made him drowsy, and he fell asleep. He awoke with a start as the train pulled up with a jerk. He looked out of the window. Yes, it

was Lithgow platform. He started. A man well muffled up, and with dark glasses on, stood upon the platform. It was Rushton, and disguised though he was Nat recognised him. He was evidently about to travel by this train, so Nat kept his seat, and drew his collar up again so that his face could not be seen.

Strange working of fate ! Just as the train was about to start, Rushton, with a rapid glance up and down the platform, opened the carriage door in which Nat sat apparently fast asleep. He sprang in. The door went to with a bang, and the train moved off.

Rushton eyed Nat Smiley curiously, but did not recognise him. The train passed on, and the Zig-zag was reached.

Then she commenced to wend her way up that wonderful piece of engineering skill like a snake crawling up a mountain side.

By some chance Nat's collar became lowered, and Rushton, glancing round, saw his face, and at the same time Nat's eyes met his.

It was a case of mutual recognition. Rushton instinctively felt Nat was on his track.

"I recognized you on the platform, Richard Rushton," said Nat ; "you have gone a step too far, this time, my man. Assault with violence on a young lady is an offence for which there is a heavy penalty."

"Curse you," said Rushton ; "I suppose you mean to hound me down. But I'll be even with you." He took a revolver from his coat pocket as he spoke, and continued :

"This little barker will soon settle you. I mean to get out at the next station, so you had better not meddle with me."

"I get out there too," said Nat, quietly, keeping his eyes fixed on Rushton, and watching his movements. He fancied he saw Rushton about to fire. He must not hesitate a moment. He sprang at his man, and with a rapid twist of the arm, made Rushton drop the weapon on the floor of the carriage.

Mad with rage, Rushton fought like a demon. It was a terrible struggle. Neither spoke. The train crawled slowly up the mountain, until the top Ziz-zag was almost reached. They fought like tigers. Suddenly Rushton caught Nat by the waist and brought him down. On the floor they fought, and Nat gained a slight mastery. Now they struggled to their feet again.

"What's that? A crash, a rush of wind, and the door of the carriage flew open. Nat, with Rushton still clutching him, had driven his adversary against the door, and it had burst open.

The train was now at almost the highest point, and the depth below was fearful.

Rushton gave a wild glance round. Nat saw the danger, and loosing his hold had clutched the door. He then tried to shake Rushton off. Both their lives hung upon a thread over that vast abyss, and in the moonlight they could peer down into the depths below. With a great effort Nat shook Rushton off.

With a cry he fell backward, but as he did so caught Nat's coat and dragged him forward. Nat clutched the door with both hands, and hung there with his enemy still clinging to him. Rushton's hold at last relaxed just as Nat felt he must let go.

Another fearful cry, and Richard Rushton vanished. Nat fancied he heard a dull thud, and shuddered as he drew himself up.

But Rushton's piercing cry had brought several people

to the windows, and the guard had signalled the train to stop.

In a few, brief words Nat explained what had happened, and suggested that he should go down the Ziz-zag and look for the fallen man. Dr. S——, who happened to be in the train, volunteered to go with him and the guard, knowing Nat Smiley well, consented, when both of them had given their word to exonerate him from blame, and to be present at the inquiry.

The train moved on, and Nat and the doctor walked slowly down the Zig-zag.

It was a weird scene. All around was as still as death with the exception of the rustle of the wind among the mountain trees. Down they went lower and lower until at last the foot was reached. Then they looked up and traced the line where Rushton had fallen.

"What a fearful height!" said the doctor with a shudder. "He must have been instantly killed. It's a mercy you are not lying with him."

"It's not his fault that I am not there," said Nat.

They climbed up the rocks, and after a long search found Rushton lying on a large rock, and, to all appearances, dead. He was fearfully mangled.

"He has bumped from ledge to ledge in his fall," said the doctor, as he felt his heart and pulse. "He's not dead yet, but he can't last long."

He poured something from a small phial down Rushton's throat, and in a short time he opened his eyes.

A spasm of pain shot across his face, and he groaned. Then his eyes rested on Nat Smiley, and such a glance of fiendish malice distorted his face that the doctor started back.

"You've killed me," said Rushton, with difficulty.

"You murderer. I call you to witness," he said, turning to the doctor, "that with my dying breath I swear this man deliberately killed me. He thrust me from the carriage as I was half asleep."

"You liar," said Nat. "Recollect you may have but a few moments to live. At least do not die with that foul accusation on your lips."

"You know you killed me. What I have said is the truth," groaned Rushton.

"Then listen to me," said Nat. "Dying man that you are I will not spare you. You robbed me of my wife, and the sin of her murder is on your soul."

Rushton shuddered. "How could Nat know that," he thought.

"My wretched wife was in your power, and you made her life a misery. I have seen her."

Again Rushton groaned.

"Let me tell you, Richard Rushton, that she is not dead. You have been deceived, robbed, duped, swindled, and by the man you paid to hide your wretched secret."

Nat knew his man. He knew it would be worse than death to Rushton to hear that Blossom had deceived him, and that his victim was not dead.

"It's a lie," almost shrieked Rushton, and yet he felt Nat spoke the truth.

"It's the truth. I swear it," said Nat.

"Curses on you all," groaned Rushton. "But I ruined your life," he continued, with a chuckle. "I made your home a misery. I'd do it again, curse you."

"Have you no thought of the future?" said the doctor. "I warn you you have but a few minutes to live."

"Do you think I fear death?" said Rushton. "Not I, It's a lie. I'm not going to die. I won't die. Oh, what fearful pain," and he sank back in a faint.

Presently he came round. A torrent of bitter words and oaths broke from his lips. It was fearful to hear such blasphemy from the lips of a dying man in that awful, lonely place, and in the dead of night.

A change passed over Rushton's face.

"He's going," said the doctor in a whisper to Nat.

Rushton caught the words, and shrieked aloud :

"I'll not die. Curse you all, I'll not die. Ah ! look, look there. See that awful figure. Take it away. Mercy, mercy," and he pointed with trembling hand into the forest gloom.

How he raved and cursed. He fought with death as he had fought with Nat.

It was a struggle terrible to behold. At last he sank back. A quiver passed through his body, and with a look of terror, rage, and hate, such as they never forgot, Nat and the doctor saw his life ebb slowly away.

"What a fearful end," said the doctor. "He must have been a bad man."

"He is dead, so let his sins die with him," said Nat.

"You do not believe what he said, Doctor ?"

"About you killing him ? No, certainly not. What a struggle you must have had."

Nat related all about it as they retraced their steps towards Lithgow.

Rushton's body was also taken to Lithgow, where an inquest was held.

The tragic end of a man so well known caused a sensation, and the papers had full and graphic accounts or the fearful accident known as the "Zig-zag Tragedy."

Nat Smiley was exonerated from all blame in the affair, and congratulated upon his escape.

The news reached Yeronga quickly, and Tilly shud.

dered when she heard of the fate which had so righteously overtaken the man who had so basely used her.

And Maude Standish, what were her thoughts? Tilly knew her secret, and fully understood what her feelings must be.

A woman's heart is a strange composition. Maude cried when she heard of Rushton's awful end, and thought of what the man once was to her. Badly as he had behaved, she still could not quite forget the first few weeks of happiness with him. But as she thought of the wrong he had done her, sadness for his fate vanished, and she recognised he had met a just punishment. It was agreed between herself and Tilly that Rushton's intimacy with Maude should remain a secret. No need to let the light of day upon that dark scene in the past.

Rushton's death had a peculiar effect upon Nat Smiley. He saw in it the hand of Providence. He was not a religious man, but there was an even-handed justice about his death which made him think deeply. He had determined to hunt Rushton down, but Providence had interposed and punished the man as he deserved. Nat could not but acknowledge the doom of Rushton was just. Cut off in the midst of his crimes, what an awful lesson his fate must teach.

Blossom Squirm was in a "beast of a temper," so Mrs. Squirm said, when he heard the news. He blurted it out before poor Mrs. Smiley in his rough, uncouth way, so that the shock nearly killed her.

She moaned and said :

"What will become of me? Don't turn me out, Blossom. I can't work, I'm too ill."

"Turn yer out. Not me, missus. Why Mr. Smiley

said yer was to be well cared for." Blossom had said this without thought.

Mrs. Smiley gazed at him with dilated eyes.

"What's that you say?" she said, in a hoarse voice. "Say it again, quick, quick."

"Oh, bother," said Blossom. "But I guess you may as well know all. Yer proper husband, Mr. Nat Smiley, came here and saw yer one night when yer was asleep. Blow me if I don't think he's fond of you yet, after all the trouble you've caused him. He's one of them good-natured, soft-hearted fellows he is."

"Fond of me yet," groaned the wretched woman. "Oh, no, not that. Kindness from him would kill me. But I'd like him to forgive me before I die, for I feel I am dying, Blossom. I've wronged him deeply, I'd not like to go without his blessing. Find him for me, Blossom. Tell him to come and forgive me."

"There, there," said Blossom. "Don't take on so. You're not going to die yet. Cheer up a bit. I'll find him, and I'll bet a quart he comes direct."

"Find him soon, Blossom, or it may be too late," she said, and Blossom left the room promising to do his best.

The wretched woman lay thinking far into the night. What a judgment had overtaken Rushton, and it was now quickly overtaking her! Would Nat forgive her? Yes, she knew that honest nature full well, and felt sure of it. So he had watched her while she slept. She knew it, had she not dreamt his face had bent over her with a kindly smile? Yes, he would come, and with his forgiveness she could die in peace. Her miserable life and her great suffering would surely be some atonement for the past. Now, as she lay, on what she felt was her dying bed, she wondered with strange amaze-

ment how she could have believed a serpent like Rushton, and deserted a husband like Smiley. It seemed a mocking, hideous dream. But it was true, yes, too true. We often make false steps in life, which take years of reparation to make atonement. Nat Smiley's wife had sinned deeply, but she had also suffered greatly, therefore do not let us judge her too harshly.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SHE IS PURER, BETTER THAN I.

NAT SMILEY'S erring wife was dying. The doctor said she was sinking fast, and that her life hung upon a thread, which might snap at any moment. She knew her hours were numbered. But one thought, one craving, held possession of her. She desired her husband's forgiveness before she died.

Blossom was determined she should see Nat, both for his sake and her own, before she went. He could pose as the benefactor of this poor creature, and he knew Nat's character well enough to guess he would not forget any kindness that had been shown his wife.

So he set about his task at once. He found it easier than he had anticipated, for the Yeronga party, with the exception of Briscoe, had returned to Sydney. He met Nat in the street, and told him his errand. For one moment Nat Smiley hesitated. Then he said : "I will come to-night. Tell her I will not fail."

"That I will, sir," said Blossom. "But don't be late, sir. She may pop off at any moment, the doctor said."

"So bad as that?" said Nat.

"Yes. He said she's awful bad. I expect that rascal would have killed her long ago if I hadn't looked pretty smart after him. He deserved all he got, Mr. Smiley. Hanging was a dashed sight too good for the likes of him," said Blossom.

"He's gone, and let the past go with him," said Nat. "You shall not be forgotten, Blossom, I promise you."

"Thank you, sir," he replied. "But I hope I'll always do my duty by a fellow-creature in any circumstances."

Nat smiled incredulously as he said :

"No doubt you will. Don't forget to tell her I'll be there to-night. Now go."

Blossom left, and Nat walked moodily along the street.

It had come to this. The woman he had once loved lay sick unto death. He no longer loved her. It had been a severe wrench, but he had succeeded in blotting her out of his heart. Not out of his life. He felt he could never quite do that. She had once been all in all to him. Until Rushton had stolen her away she had made him very happy.

He examined his conduct towards her keenly, and could find no cause of complaint. He had behaved well, and how had she requited him.

He walked almost mechanically into the Gardens, and as he passed down the well-tended pathway he saw Maude Standish reading a book, seated in a quiet nook. She was alone.

What chance had placed her there. His heart was full. With a sudden resolve he said to himself, he would tell her his story.

"Miss Standish," he said, gently.

She looked up with a start, and a pretty blush mantled her cheeks.

"How fair she is," thought Nat.

"How you startled me, Mr. Smiley. You are studying the beauties of nature, I presume," she said, archly.

"If I was in the humour I should pass a compliment and say at this precise moment I am studying one of nature's master-pieces."

There could be no mistaking the earnestness of his meaning.

Maude turned away her head as she said :

"That is a very pretty compliment, Mr. Smiley. But why are you in such a melancholy humour?"

"Shall I tell you, Miss Standish," he said, as he sat down. "Shall I tell you a sad story?"

She looked at him in surprise.

"If you care to repose confidence in me I shall feel honoured," she said.

"Then I will tell you. Once I loved a sweet, pure girl. She returned my love, and after a brief courtship we were married. We lived happily together in my small lonely cottage for a time, until a snake in the grass appeared. We were all in all to each other. My business called me away from home, and I left my wife guarded, as I thought, by a friend, who promised to watch over her in case of need.

"So well did he guard her that when I returned I found my home deserted. My wife had gone, and my friend had stolen her from me. I little knew that for some time past he had instilled wicked thoughts into her mind. I found it out too late. I never let him think I knew what he had done. He felt so secure I would not suspect him that he condoled with me on my

loss. But I knew he had done this thing, and I determined to hunt him down in my own way. Step by step I tracked him. His own evil passions lured him on to destruction. Crash after crash came, and at last he met with a fearful death, accidentally at my hands. I saw him die a horrid, sinful, agonising death, and my revenge is complete."

Maude looked at him with startled eyes. A terrible presentiment crossed her brain. Who was this man?

"He is gone," continued Nat. "But she lives. Miss Standish, my poor wife lies on her dying bed, and has sent for me to forgive her. I shall go there to-night. A sad story of wrecked lives, is it not?"

"Very, very sad," said Maude, dreamily. Then putting her hand, a small white jewelled hand, on Nat's arm, she said:

"Who was this man?"

Nat now looked surprised.

"Do you wish to know, Miss Standish?"

"Yes," she said, in a low voice, as though bracing herself to hear bad news.

"Then I will tell you," said Nat. "His name was Richard Rushton, now——"

He stopped suddenly. Maude had almost fainted. She had turned as white as death. It was a terrible shock to her.

"Thanks, I am better now," she said, as Nat supported her. "It was so fearful to think of that man being so wicked. What a mercy Tilly escaped him."

"It was," said Nat. "He would have done anything dreadful for revenge."

"May I ask a favour of you?" said Maude.

"Certainly," said Nat. "If it is in my power I will grant it you before it is asked."

"It is a strange request," said Maude. "Will you let me go with you to see your wife to-night?"

"That is a strange request, Miss Standish," he said; "I do not know your reason for asking it, but as I have promised, you may come with me if you wish it."

"Believe me, it is no idle fancy prompts me to ask you," said Maude. "I have good reason for making the request."

"Then you shall come," said Nat; "I know it is not merely idle curiosity."

"Indeed it is not," said Maude; "I was never more in earnest."

That night Maude Standish accompanied Nat Smiley to his dying wife's bedside.

For some time Nat sat alone with the woman he had loved. What passed between them is sacred. Nat fully and freely forgave her for the past, but said his love for her was dead. He kissed her forehead, and spoke soothingly, and yet she felt it was not the fond husband of better days who had come back to her.

Presently Nat said:

"I have a request to make. A dear friend of mine, Miss Standish, sister of my partner, has come with me, and wished to see you. It was her own request."

The dying woman looked hard at her husband, and he turned away his head.

She sighed deeply, and said:

"Let her come in. If she is a good woman she will do me good."

"She is pure as an angel," said Nat, and opening the door he admitted Maude into the room.

She carried in her hand a beautiful bouquet of flowers which she placed on the small table by the bedside.

"I thought perhaps I might be of some use," she said.

"A woman can always be of use in a sick chamber. You will soon be better, I hope."

She smiled sadly.

"I shall never be better, Miss Standish," she said. "It was very good of you to come and see a sick, dying woman, such as I am. Take warning by my wretched past, and when you have a good, kind husband, love him to your dying day."

Maude hung her head, and murmured :

"You may have erred, but you have atoned for it. We are none of us perfect in this world."

"I wronged a good, kind man. I was a base, wicked woman. But oh ! how I have suffered for it with that fiend."

Maude shuddered, but did not speak.

"Ah, God, if you but knew that man's nature."

Poor Maude. It was hard for her, but she must bear it. It was part of her self-imposed penance.

"He treated me like a slave. He never had one word of kindness for me after he had satisfied his own base desires. He nearly drove me mad."

"Poor woman," said Maude, as she placed a fair hand on her hot burning head.

"Don't touch me. I'm not fit for you to touch," said the wretched woman ; "you are purer and better than I."

"No, no, no," said Maude, as she hid her face against that of the dying woman, and kissed her poor wan cheeks. "Don't say that. I am no better, no purer."

"Oh, yes you are, dear," she replied ; "Nat said you were as pure as an angel, and I can see it in your face."

Poor Maude. She had indeed placed herself in a trying position.

They sat with Nat's wife until late on into the night.

A change suddenly passed over her. She called them both to her bedside, and took their hands. It was a melancholy scene.

She gasped for breath. With an effort she took Maude's hand, and placed it in Nat's.

She looked at him with a yearning look, as she said :

"Cherish her, Nat. She will be dear to you some day. I know it. I see it in her face now. God bless her and you. She is purer and better than I."

Maude could bear it no longer. Tears rained down her face, as she hid it in both her hands. Nat felt awkward and ashamed, and yet his heart beat fast with a hope he had dared to cherish. It was a strange feeling, and yet, do what he would, he could not set it aside. He felt like a criminal, seeking a new bride at the death-bed of his wife.

But the dying woman had spoken her last words. She lay back calm and peaceful, and in a few moments she was gone.

Nat and Maude sat silently looking at her. Neither spoke. At last their eyes met. Nat gave her a tender look as though he would fain have spoken had he dared.

Maude's heart beat fast. What was this peculiar sensation? It rushed over her like a wave, and she felt she loved this man. Loved him! And then she thought of the past, and lowered her head in shame.

"Maude," said Nat, very gently; "here, in the presence of the dead, I cannot speak the words I would. She knew my secret. Did she read your heart aright?" Maude sobbed bitterly.

"Don't speak to me. Don't touch me. She said I was purer and better than she. God knows I am not. I am not fit for any good man's wife."

Nat looked startled. "I'll not believe it," he said.

"You have never done any great wrong. No one could look in your face and say that."

"Listen," said Maude; "you told me your story this morning, I will tell you mine to-night. Here, before this poor dead woman, I will confess my shame. You told me of a woman's ruin, I will tell you of another's wretched life."

Then Maude Standish poured into Nat Smiley's ears the story of her life. He was stricken dumb with amazement.

"I was ruined, tempted, and fell," went on Maude. "Lured from my friends by false promises of marriage. Then deserted and left upon the streets. I had lost honour and self-respect. I had become a thing to be shunned, and yet I was more sinned against than sinning. I, too, have suffered. I worked hard, and I earned my living. After that one fatal slip I kept pure and free from guilt, as God's my judge. She said I was purer and better than she. You see now what I am."

It was a terrible task for Maude to tell Nat Smiley her past life, but she loved him, and felt she could trust him. He sat still, and said never a word. At last he spoke.

"His name," he said. "If he is alive I will kill him."

Maude trembled from head to foot. "No, no, not his name," she said. "Anything but that."

"Tell me his name," said Nat, as he took her hand in a firm grip.

"Better not," said Maude. "He's beyond your reach."

"Dead?" said Nat.

"Yes," said Maude. Then suddenly she added:

"I must tell you all. I will. The man who ruined

my early life, ruined your honour, and killed your poor, dead wife."

Nat started back with a cry of horror.

"Richard Rushton," he hissed.

Maude sank to the ground at his feet.

He looked down upon her with a pitying eye. Was Fate working some horrible trick with him? Had he heard aright? Richard Rushton. Two women had he loved. One lay dead by his side, the other knelt at his feet. One was gone, the other remained. His first love was dead in his heart, but the second dwelt there still, and it throbbed with pain. And Rushton had ruined them both. Strange indeed are the workings of Fate, if Fate it was.

"Maude," he said, as he raised her gently. "Maude, my love, hear me. There lies the woman I once loved—dead. Here is the woman I now love with my whole heart—alive. My duty to the dead is done. My duty to the living has but begun. I know your life. Maude, I tell you that the past will make no difference to me. No word of it shall ever cross my lips. Rolf shall live as he now lives in happy ignorance of that scoundrel's guilt. To me you are dearer for what you have suffered. Maude in the presence of death, in the presence of the woman I once called wife, and who placed your hand in mine, I ask you to be my own for life. 'Tis a strange wooing, but 'tis a strange intermingling of lives has brought us together. What is your answer, Maude?"

She looked into his face with her beautiful eyes wet with tears.

"If you can take me for your wife, knowing what I have been, I will be true to you, Nat. I love you with all my heart. That poor dead woman could penetrate

into both our hearts. It must have cost her a bitter pang to know the truth. God knows I would have spared it her, and I never thought of that when I came. On, Nat, my love. It is not for me to take you, it is for you to say you will have my unworthy self."

Nat clasped her in his arms, and kissed her fondly.

"You have made me so happy, Maude."

"And I have found more happiness than I ever expected or deserved," she replied.

It was a strange, weird betrothal, at the bedside of that dead woman. But they both felt she would have wished it so, had she been able to speak.

Nat spoke to Blossom about the necessary funeral arrangements, and then left with Maude.

"Looks more like a wedding than a funeral," said Blossom to Mrs. Squirm. "My eye, ain't she a real daisy. Say, old woman, she's what I call real jam. None of yer 'role-y-poley,' but the real article."

"Blossom," said Mrs. Squirm, severely. "You forgets yourself."

"Don't be jealous, old 'oman. I wouldn't swop for the world."

"Wouldn't swop," said Mrs. Squirm. "I should think not, indeed. I say, Blossom, will he give me a new dress?"

"Two," said Blossom.

"What!" ejaculated Mrs. Squirm.

"Two. A black 'un and a white 'un," said Blossom.

"What for," said Mrs. Squirm.

"A funeral and a weddin'," said Blossom, with a grin. His feelings were not particularly sensitive.

"Poor thing," said Mrs. Squirm, with a sigh.

"Which of 'em," said Blossom.

"Her as lies upstairs, poor dear," said Mrs. Squirm, with a snigger.

"Oh, I thought it might have been t'other one. Her's," with a jerk of his thumb to the ceiling, "all right. Her troubles are over. T'other one ain't begun her's yet."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MATTERS SATISFACTORILY SETTLED.

THE gloom is past and brightness reigns supreme. Through varied scenes we have followed the fortunes of Rolf Standish and his mate Nat Smiley, Tilly Briscoe and her father, and Maude and Richard Rushton. They have played their parts and worked out their destinies. Nat Smiley felt melancholy for several weeks after his wife's death. But he could not grieve long for one who had wronged him so deeply. Maude Standish had accepted Nat as her husband, knowing that he knew all. It was agreed between them and Tilly that Rolf should never be told of the part Rushton had played in Maude's life.

Rolf was delighted at the prospect of having Nat for a brother-in-law, and heartily congratulated Maude upon her conquest.

One morning Maude was surprised by a visitor calling on her. It was Lord Studley, and he came on an important errand. The heir to a dukedom, the *aide-de-camp* of the Governor, had come to offer his hand to the

fair Maude Bradley he had known as the Queen of Beauty. He pleaded his cause earnestly, but without avail. Maude felt honoured by his offer, and candidly confessed it, but told him fully all she had done, and that it was impossible for her to accept him.

"That need not prevent us being friends I hope, Lord Studley," she said.

"I had hoped to make you my wife, Maude," he replied, "but as that is impossible, believe me when I say I wish you every happiness, and shall always remain what you desire me to be—a friend, and," he added, "I hope a true one."

"That I am sure you will be," said Maude as she held out her hand, and Lord Studley clasped it heartily and in a few moments was gone.

When Maude told Nat what had happened he looked grave, and said :

"You have thrown a great chance away, Maude. Do you think you have done right? It is not fair that you should sacrifice so much for me."

"Do you think I want a title?" she said. "Your love is more to me, Nat, than either wealth or rank. It is you that are making the sacrifice, taking me as I am."

"Maude, never allude to that episode in your life again. To me it has never existed. I have blotted out the past almost from memory."

Tilly and Rolf were now eager to be married and settle down. Yeronga was to be their home for a time at least, and the Hon. Robert was to remain there as long as he wished.

"Recollect," said Rolf, "I have given Yeronga to Tilly, and she can hand it over to you as a wedding gift."

The next mail from England brought news for Maude.

It brought a letter from her lawyer, in which he stated old Rushton was dead, and that he felt certain the securities he had given for the money Maude had lent him would more than realise the full sum. "Strange to relate," the letter went on, "the principal security is the estate of your late father, Mr. Standish, which it appears Rushton purchased through an agent when it was put up for sale. I presume you will not attempt to sell it, but keep it in the family. It is strange how after all these years the estate should come back to its lawful owner in such a remarkable manner. I shall await your instructions by the next mail."

When Maude showed the letter to Rolf he was amazed and delighted.

"But how came it you lent old Rushton so much money?" he said.

Maude blushed, as she replied :

"Because the lawyer said he could give me ample security, and that it was a good investment."

"It was the hand of fate," said Rolf. "Maude, that man ruined our father, and now his guilt has come home to him, and he has been punished as well as his son. There is justice in this at any rate."

"You must take the old place," said Maude ; "the name of Standish must be once more beloved and honoured in the old land of our birth. It is yours, Rolf, by right, and you must have it."

"I will accept it, Maude, but you must let me recompense you for it. I cannot accept such a gift without giving a due equivalent for it."

"It is yours, Rolf, and I will take nothing for it," said Maude.

At Yeronga Hilton may be seen one fine bright morning looking fondly at a horse cantering along the green track with a lad sitting him like a statue, and seeming to be part and parcel of the animal. It is The Outlaw bounding over the springy turf with an easy, graceful motion that cannot be surpassed.

He smiles as the horse passes him, and mutters half aloud,

"You're not the brute they took you for, my beauty, are you? By jove! you made it bad for 'em in the Cup. Blest if I didn't think you'd do it all along."

"Did you indeed, Hilton?" said a cheery voice behind him, and turning with a start, he saw Tilly and Rolf, who had come up unawares.

"Yes, I did, Miss Tilly," said Hilton; "I'd great faith in him, and it was the best deal in horseflesh Mr. Rolf ever made when he bought The Outlaw dirt cheap."

"I confess it," laughed Rolf; "you had the pull over us in the Cup, Hilton. But it was very deep of you not to let us into the secret. To have a Cup winner in your own stable and not be in the swim's a bit of a puzzler."

"It was too bad of you, Hilton. You backed him yourself and never put us on," said Tilly.

"Chaff away, Miss Tilly," said Hilton; "I can stand a lot of that. I'm glad the colt won, because it bowled that cad Rushton out."

Tilly shuddered, and Rolf said:

"We've agreed to drop his name, Hilton. We'll never speak of him again."

"I'm sure I don't wish to soil my mouth with his ugly name," replied Hilton. "What do you think of Rufus? Looks well, don't he?"

"Yes," said Rolf; "he's a real good lad, and is making a name in his profession. You've taught him a trick or two, I fancy, Hilton" said Rolf.

"I've taught him how to get on," said Hilton; "and maybe I've given him a useful hint or two. I've taught him that an honest lad is bound to come out on top. I've told him never to get his legs across a stiff 'un, but always ride to win."

"That's right, Hilton. If he follows your advice he'll not want for patronage."

There were several horses in work at Yeronga at this time, additions having been made to the string.

It had been decided that Tilly and Rolf should take a trip to England after their marriage, and that Rolf should formally take possession of his old home. Yeronga was to remain in the Hon. Robert's hands, and as his speculations had all been turning out well of late, he was in a perfect state of happiness. Miss Rowton was to remain with him as housekeeper, and he said it would look quite like olden times, more especially when Tilly came back again.

Marriage bells were soon ringing out joyous peals, and as honest Fred Martin said :

"Them two couples were about the finest he'd ever seen tied up. But our Miss Tilly was the best, although her might be a little 'un against t'other."

One beautiful moonlight night, a week before Rolf and Tilly were to sail for the Old Land, Rolf sat on the verandah at Yeronga, alone, smoking a cigar.

How quiet all was around. The faint lowing of cattle could be occasionally heard, and the cool breeze made music in the trees.

Rolf thought of the days that had gone. He traced his career from the day he first landed in Australia.

Then he thought of that meeting with Briscoe which changed the whole course of his life and led him on to Tilly and fortune. Had it not been for that chance meeting what would have become of him? Then he saw vividly a scene on the same verandah when Richard Rushton hurled a vile accusation at him and implicated Tilly. He smiled now as he thought of Briscoe's honest wrath, and liked him all the better for showing it. Then came that awful time when he was lost in the bush, and had well nigh perished, when Nat Smiley, the best of friends, had come to his aid. What luck he had at Melrose Creek, and how rapidly his fortune had been made. And now he was about to return home, not penniless, but as the rightful owner of that dear old house in which he was born and in which he had spent so many happy hours. Would it be home to him now? Alas! he felt it would not. The old familiar faces were gone from the scene. He could revisit the place with pleasure, not unmingled with pain, and yet he knew, he felt he could not remain there, but must return to this new land, where he had, as it were, been born again, and where he had won the wife he loved so dearly.

Tilly joined him and they talked until late at night. How happy they were, and what a life of joy and peace seemed opening out before them!

Briscoe came out to wish them good-night, and Nat and his wife also.

"Quite a family group," said Briscoe. "So I shall lose you for a time, Tilly," he said, stroking her hair.

"Yes, dad. But we shall soon return, and then the meeting will be more delightful than ever, after a short absence."

"I won't keep her long away," said Rolf, "for I know how you will want to see her again."

"I shall," he said. "Be sure and take great care of her."

"I was thinking to-night of the time when we first met," said Rolf.

"You were pretty hard up then, young man," laughed Briscoe. "By Jove, you looked as if you hadn't had a decent feed for a week."

"No more I had," said Rolf. "I was deuced hard hit, I can tell you. What changes have happened since then. Here's your daughter actually married to one of your former servants," laughed Rolf.

"Like his impudence," said Briscoe. "I'll cut her off with a shilling. I have one now, thanks to you, Rolf, but as you know I've been hard hit in my time."

"And so have I," said Nat.

"And so have I," added Maude.

"We have all been hard hit at one time or another," said Rolf, "but we seem to have got over it very well."

"You especially," said Tilly, archly. "No one to look at you would think you'd suffered much."

"But I have," laughed Rolf.

"Indeed, sir," said Tilly, with a smile.

"Yes, indeed, Mrs. Standish," said Rolf. "And I can tell you that the first time I saw your ladyship I was exceedingly 'Hard Hit.'"

THE END.

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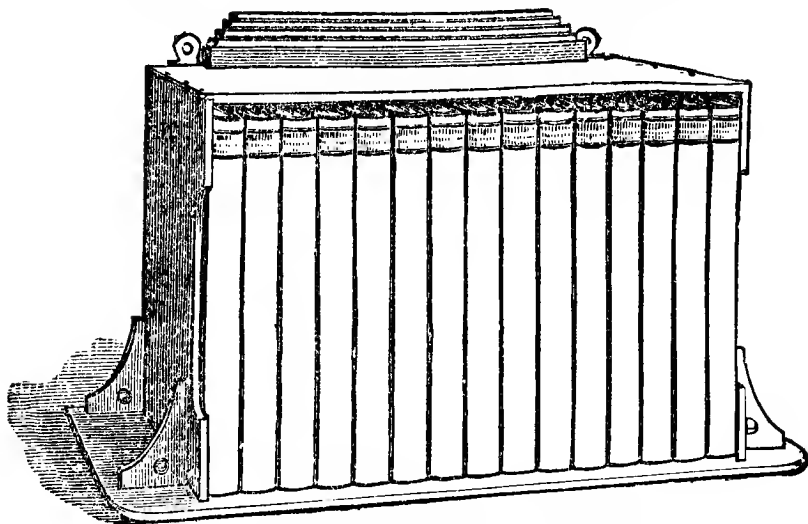
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